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MURDER'S NEVER EASY

by

Roger Torrey

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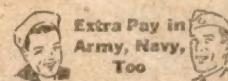


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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES



March, 1942

Vol. 10, No. 4

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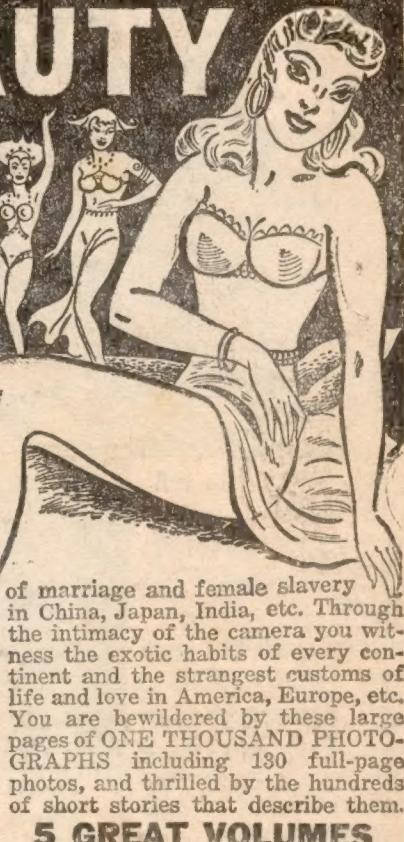
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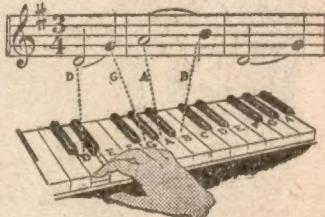
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By DALE BOYD



E SAID, "Honestly, Legler, I positively don't know what he wants. He just said for me to get you; said he wanted to have a talk with you."



I lit a cigarette. "Hell, he's got a phone and so have I!"

"But Captain McCormick said it was pretty important and sort of—well, personal." So I sighed, and reached for my hat. Mike McCormick and I had spent ten years on the force together; I knew him like a book.

My Uncle Herb was a captain of detectives, and when he died, he left me a little jack and I got into the private shamus business. Tried to get Mike to go in with me, but he stuck to his uniform and now he was a captain. Me, I wasn't doing so bad either. But, anyway, I rode to headquarters in the prowler car.

Mike shook my hand and patted my back and gave me a cigar. He asked how I was getting along, what I thought of this, and my honest opinion of that, and finally, "Say, Leggie, how's your Aunt Berta?"

So this was it! I got cautious and said, "Fine, Mike. I saw her a couple of days ago and she asked about you. What's she been doing now?"

He grinned, and said irrelevantly, "I wish I had some of her apple strudel right now." Then he built a steeple out of his fingers and coughed. "Seems like the neighbors are squawking again, Leggie. Third complaint this week. She's got herself a pair of binoculars from somewhere and—!"

I had to laugh. "Mike," I said, "that's absurd. Aunt Berta would spend ten bucks for the ingredients

the MAKING

"You know I could shoot you both, and no jury would convict me!"



of one dish to tickle her palate, but she wouldn't put out a thin dime to see Hitler and Mussolini riding tan-

dem on a kiddie car! You know that!"

He leafed through some papers on his desk. "This complaint was

The girl was a murder walking around, waiting to be committed. At least so thought the nosy fat woman who tried to prevent trouble—and got into it! A story of peculiar revenge. . . .

lodged by a guy named Wilkinson. Says he and his wife can't go to bed at night without feeling like the second act climax in a bedroom farce. Says she spends all her time on the front porch watching her neighbors, peeping through windows!"

That made me sore. I snapped, "Why in hell don't they pull their shades down, or else do things they aren't ashamed of? I'll go tell them something! Aunt Berta is a lonely old lady living there by herself; she's deaf as a post and don't get around good! Nothing to do for amusement, and now the neighbors are picking on her again. Give me them complaints and I'll go out there and warn them to lay off the poor old lady—!"

Mike laughed out loud and I guess I grinned and got red. The reason Aunt Berta doesn't get around good is she weighs three hundred and thirty pounds. That's the reason she doesn't go to the movies any more with me, or even to the drug store for sodas.

She never leaves the house; the grocery boy delivers one day's order and takes the next. She hasn't been upstairs in the last three years, and as for being deaf!—it makes no difference at all except to cause her to talk—and by God, she talks incessantly!—with no tone at all. She can read lips like nobody's business, and swear!

My Aunt Berta has got a vocabulary crossed between a longshoreman's and that of a muleskinner. Which, combined with her cooking ability, was the reason Mike called me, a private dick, in on the binocular complaint instead of handling it himself.

So I got up and said, "Okay, Mike, I'll run out and have a little talk with her, but, remembering how tight she is, I can't figure her with binoculars."

I stopped at the drug store for half a dozen confession magazines and a five-pound box of chocolates. On account of my stomach Aunt Berta has to be handled easy like, her being the best cook in the state. Then I drove on out Van Brunt to Delevan and turned west.

DELEVAN used to be quite a tony street, houses set well back, but close together, with big elms overshadowing everything. Uncle Herb bought out here when he was captain and Aunt Berta, his sister, kept house for him.

When he died from too much rich cooking, he'd made some swell investments. Outside of the few thousand he left me, everything else went to her. Furthermore, the bank had handled her bonds and investments so well that she was really better off than when Uncle Herb passed away, but to hear her talk you'd figure she was ready to go on over the hill to the poorhouse.

First thing I noticed in the 1100 block was the moving van right next door to Aunt Berta's. I knew she'd be on her front porch. Not being a guy to bandy words I won't say Aunt Berta is curious! She's nosey, nosey as hell.

I parked, went through the gate, being careful not to bust it off its one hinge, picked up the three evening papers and climbed the steps to the porch. She was sitting in the battered glider, all three hundred odd pounds, and *she had a pair of binocu-*

lars! The morning papers were all around her feet and a big platter of smoked turkey was in the glider beside her. She was just polishing off a drumstick.

I touched her shoulder. Impatiently she lowered the glasses. "Great balls of fire, Pudd'n," she said, "I saw you come. Can't you see when a body's busy?" She tossed the cleaned bone over the rail and raised the glasses again. I put my stuff down, broke off the other drumstick, and waited. The movers were toting in a davenport.

She chuckled. You could see Aunt Berta chuckle—as well as hear her. It started in ripples down around her hips and fought its way up in bigger and bigger waves until it bottlenecked out her mouth. She said, "Hell and highwater, Pudd'n, I wouldn't pay a mover to tote such Godawful stuff! But you should have seen the expensive lathe they took into that shanty."

She lowered the glasses then, and said, "How you been, Pudd'n? Oh, damn my eyes, my baby's brought me some reading!" She was a nut for that true confession stuff, that I-sinned-and-paid baloney.

She had the binoculars tied around her neck with a piece of string. They looked expensive.

"Yes, sir, Pudd'n," she went on tonelessly, "an expensive lathe and a lot of tools they took into his cellar. Wait until you see him. He looks mean if you don't let his glasses fool you. It's on account of—there he is!" She handed me the binoculars.

MLE, I am not particularly nosey, but when somebody shoves something in your hand and says

'here' nine times out of ten you take whatever it is. I took them and looked; it was like bringing this guy right up on the front porch.

I wish I could say there was something about him that impressed me even then, but I'm an honest shamus. He just looked like an average citizen in a dark suit and a white shirt, medium size, medium colored, medium all the way through—wearing a pair of horn rimmed glasses. He glared down the street for a couple of minutes, looked at his watch, and walked stiff-legged back into the house.

CAUSALLY Aunt Berta opened one of the evening papers and began reading, commenting all the while in that flowing monotone of the deaf. She was an inveterate newspaper reader, starting at the upper left hand corner of page one and going right on through to the lower right hand corner of the last page, want ads and all.

Finally I busted in, "Where'd you get the binoculars, Aunt Berta?"

"These doddab doodads?" she asked fondly, raising them. "Found them clear in the bloody back of the bleeding hall closet in a little leather case. Herbie's, I reckon. Not much count, are they?"

They were Navy glasses, Zeiss Binocstars, worth around \$160. I told her.

She began to breathe heavily, turned them over and over in her hands like they were gold. I would have gone on, but just then a cream-colored convertible with the top down slid to a stop on our side of the moving van and the binoculars went into use.

Personally I got good eyes so I could see what was happening. So imagine what Aunt Berta saw through those 7X marine glasses.

There was a too-blonde babe with her skirt high enough in her lap to show a lot of hose, and there was a too-well-dressed guy trying to pull her over and kiss her. I might mention that the babe was wearing a sweater that illustrated perfectly the reason Will Hays barred them. Tight—and revealing.

AUNT BERTA began repeating what they were saying, reading their lips. The guy said, "Nuts to him, I'll pinch his brains out. And what he don't know won't hurt him. Come on, baby, one more little kiss!"

The blonde pushed him back, saying, "Quit it, Harry! He's here! Quit! There he is!"

The guy with the glasses came out of the house and paused on the porch. There was a bit of skirt snatching, the door of the convertible opened, and blondie stepped out, turning politely.

Aunt Berta said, "My God in Paradise, look at his face!" I couldn't see it, he was starting for the car, but afterward Aunt Berta said it was white, then red, then green and white again but that was probably an exaggeration.

He walked out to the car smiling and shook hands with the too-well-dressed guy who got out of the car. I recognized him then. His name was Harry Bannister and he was a small-time gambler and horse player, a no good guy with the dames, a wolf.

They talked for a minute, then the husband took the wife's arm and they

went up the walk toward the house while Harry drove away. I heard Aunt Berta wheezing excitedly.

She said, "There's a guy that's really jealous of his wife! She's going to have a hell of a fine set of bruises on that arm."

After awhile we went into the house where she had hamhock and lima beans cooking. She read two of her papers from cover to cover while they were finishing up, commenting in her monotone on anything and everything, mostly about the neighbors and their doings.

During the meal she said, "Damn my eyes, that Helen-Next-Door is a pretty little thing, ain't she? Used to look like that myself years ago." She sighed until the dishes rattled on the table. "Poor little abused thing, searching for love and understanding and finding a no-good wolf like that husband of hers. He's a murder looking for a spot to be committed!"

She was an incurable romantic, Aunt Berta was. She'd never looked like that and as for Helen-Next-Door being abused, I'd beat the pants off my wife—if I had one—for even looking twice at a guy like Harry Bannister. This Helen looked to me like the kind of blonde floozie that could be picked up off the push-carts.

After awhile when we'd killed the blackberry wine and finished up the strudel I said, "Aunt Berta, the neighbors have been complaining to Captain Mike about you prying into their affairs with your glasses."

"Pudd'n," she answered, "I'm an old lady, house-bound. I got my papers and my magazines and now my binoculars. I can bring the corner right into my front yard and the



"You old snoop!" she snarled. She snatched Aunt Berta's binoculars and dashed them to the floor.

next-door neighbors into my glider. Hell's bells, I'm liable to see anything from romance to murder! The neighbors can take a bloody run and jump for themselves!"

"Well," I remember telling her, "sort of keep better back in the shadows where you won't be spotted. You reckon you could stir up a spot of corned beef and cabbage if I brought Captain Mike out Wednesday night?"

She reckoned she could.

WEDNESDAY night all she could talk about was her new neighbors, the Wolfes. She paused

from time to time for another mouth load of corned beef, but that was the only interruption.

"He's an inventor, or something, and spends a lot of time in the basement working at that lathe. And boy, is he jealous of Helen! Damn me for a Turk, if he ain't nagging her day and night. Pretty little thing, ain't she? She paused to leer knowingly at Captain Mike. "But she's outsmarting him, carrying on with that handsome fellow right under his nose!"

Mike always said Aunt Berta would make a good detective; she didn't miss much. Sure, she was nosey, but after you got to know her, somehow you couldn't much hold it against her. It was just that she was *interested* in people. Yeah, she'd have made a swell detective, or maybe one of them keyhole columnists.

"How do you know she's carrying on, Aunt Berta?" Mike asked.

"Look. When a woman bathes all up in the early afternoon and puts on little silk slings and gadgets and powders four times before she's satisfied—" Her big hands went through all the motions. "—and puts a little perfume on the tips of her ears and maybe down here—" She jabbed a stubby forefinger against her breastbone. "—she ain't doing it for a jealous husband. She's doing it in spite of him!" She shuddered and rolled her eyes. "But they're too careless, damn it! There'll be murder next door yet! Mark my words!"

ABOUT two weeks later Fred Wolfe came home unexpectedly in the middle of the afternoon. By Needling Nicodemus, as Aunt Berta

said, he came rushing out of the house like a madman, his eyes blazing, his lips pulled back from his teeth. His language was a sin and a shame, the mildest thing he said being, "By God, I'll kill the two-timing little witch if it's the last thing I do!"

He went speeding off in his car like a bat out of Hades, according to Aunt Berta. By that time even she was scared of him, he could fly into such insane rages. She was always telling me that murder and sudden death would come out of that flaming jealousy, always appealing to me to do something. Like what?

Wolfe had been gone maybe ten minutes when the cream-colored convertible rolled up. Aunt Berta said the two of them looked like they'd been wrestling, and Bannister kissed the blonde without no attempt to cover up and they sat there talking and laughing like hell on wheels wasn't just around the corner.

Aunt Berta couldn't stand it any longer. She got out of the rattletrap glider, kicked through the scattered papers and went down the front steps. Time she got there Harry was kissing the blonde again.

Aunt Berta said, "Excuse it, Mrs. Wolfe, but that fiddle-footed husband has been home and gone off looking for you. You best run the boy friend off and get in the house. He said he damned well was going to kill you."

Bannister had been drinking enough to get nasty and sore, but Helen Wolfe was scared to death. She climbed out quick, thanked Aunt Berta, and ran Bannister away.

Aunt Berta felt fine about it, specially when Helen came over a few minutes later with most of the rouge

wiped off her face and wearing a slack suit, to borrow a cup of coffee.

She smiled and said, "You know there's really nothing wrong in my seeing Harry. Fred is always so busy and he has such a temper—!"

"I know how those things go," replied Aunt Berta. "I was young and blue-blazing pretty once myself. As for that jumping-jealous old man of yours, I don't blame you for being afraid of him. There's murder in that man, damn his soul!"

"How do you know I'm afraid of him?"

"Got eyes, haven't I? And binoculars?" She explained all about her harmless little pastime, but she told me afterward Mrs. Wolfe didn't laugh very much.

When Wolfe came home an hour later, he found his wife drinking coffee, calm and serene. He started right in raving. "Now wait, Fred," she said, "I didn't know you were coming home early. I had lunch downtown. She named the spot. "Went to a show." She named it. "Had two cocktails—alone—and came on home. Maybe if you'd take me out occasionally, things would be different."

AT THE dinner table that night Aunt Berta saw him say, "I've been thinking about what you said, honey. Sure, I'm jealous. A man that wouldn't be jealous of a woman like you is nuts. But I'm a sport. Tonight we'll see the elephant and hear the owl."

She was pretty cautious at that. She asked him just where he wanted to go.

"Well," he said, "I could put up with a little food and music under

the moon. There's a new club out here called the Mountain Top."

After the dishes were put in the sink, they went upstairs. By now Aunt Berta was so interested in her neighbors that she climbed the steps herself, something she hadn't done in three years. Helen spent as much time dressing as if she were going to meet Harry.

Wolfe, already fixed, leaned against a door jamb to watch her put on the finishing touches, a funny sort of look in his eyes. As she moved out of the room, he ground his cigarette beneath his heel and went across to the bureau. The thing he took out of the bureau drawer and dropped in his side pocket was bright and shiny.

Then Helen Wolfe came back, ready to go. It was only then that Aunt Berta realized what was really happening. Down the stairs she creaked, the binoculars banging against her bosom, groaning and muttering and swearing. But she couldn't get out of the house before the Wolfe car wheeled out of their drive.

She was standing there with her fists clenched, staring down the street when I drove up. Before I could say a word, she grabbed my arm and shrilled, "You got to stop him, you got to stop him, you're a shamus, he's going to murder her!"

Over and over she kept repeating what had occurred, kept saying, "I told you it was murder in the making, murder in the making, he's trapping her! Bless her innocent little heart and damn him for the shiftless skunk he is!"

"I'm just a private shamus not too long on brains, so maybe I can't

explain this properly. I admit Aunt Berta had no business nosing in the way she did. On the other hand she'd never had no romance or nothing like that herself—I told you how she went for those true confession things—and here she was getting an opportunity to practically live one, at least see one acted out in the flesh.

— I didn't blame her too much. And as a matter of fact, I'd listened to her chatter about the Wolfes for so long it sort of got to me. I was halfway to the Mountain Top before I got wise to myself.

What was *I* getting so worked up about? The blonde was a cheap, trifling little floozie, Bannister was a dime a dozen lady's man, a two bit gambler. Seemed to me the only one in the trio worth a damn was Wolfe himself. He worked, he paid his wife's expenses. Still, Aunt Berta said he took a gun out of that bureau drawer. I always figured part of being a good policeman, private or otherwise, was preventing crime as well as getting the criminal after the crime was committed. Maybe I could keep the little guy out of trouble.

He was sitting alone on the flagstoned porch beneath the moon, like he'd wanted to do. Helen was powdering her nose—or making a phone call. She came in right after I got my drink. Whew! Her evening gown was flame red and looked like she'd used a shoehorn or a tire tool to get into it. Been me, I'd have been scared to sit down, and I noticed she did ease her hips into the chair pretty cautiously.

It was one of those strapless things that always make guys' eyes bulge and make 'em wonder how dames

hold them up. In other words, plenty of cuticle.

They didn't talk much, but they drank plenty. Particularly Wolfe. Mrs. Wolfe was dumb enough to keep eyeing the door—which made me suspect the phone call. And sure enough, in half hour or so, Bannister showed up.

He had plenty of guts. He walked right over to their table and Wolfe greeted him like a long lost friend. He yelled for another chair, ordered a bottle rather than drinks, and while his wife danced cheek to cheek with Bannister, proceeded to get loop legged.

I FINISHED my steak, stayed for the floor show, and decided to go home, disgusted with myself, disgusted with Aunt Berta. She'd probably seen the little guy drop a cigarette case in his pocket.

The dancers began going back onto the floor, I called for my check. Helen Wolfe and Bannister were among the missing. Probably I wouldn't have thought much of it except for Fred Wolfe. He'd gone through the floor show with his head on his chest, apparently passed out. When the dance music started, he was as sober as me.

He put his glasses in a case, the case in his pocket. He grinned and his grin made me think of Aunt Berta's "murder in the making" remark. He got up, patted his right hand coat pocket and headed toward the door.

Aunt Berta was right! It was a trap! And the victims, or the prey, had fallen into it! There were two things I could do. Grab him and fan him for a gun and probably find

he had a permit, or hunt up the wife and boy friend and break it up before he spotted them.

I kept Wolfe in view but angled off from him, doing a little searching on my own. A vine-covered pergola looked likely. The moon sifting through the leaves left a lacy pattern on a picture that wasn't very nice. They were there, all right, and they deserved shooting!

I opened my mouth—and Wolfe beat me to it, coming in from the other direction while I was getting my eyes full. He had the shiny gun in his hand.

Murder in the making! All I could do was grab my own rod and pray.

The blonde squealed, "Fred!" And there was the damnedest untangling you ever saw.

Bannister quavered, "Now listen, Wolfe—!"

Wolfe grated, "Suppose you listen to me, and you, too, you damned two-timing little tramp. You know I could shoot the both of you and no jury in the land would touch me!"

"Now look, Wolfe," Bannister tried again. The babe kept right on whinnying.

"I fixed this up for tonight," gloated Wolfe. "I've known what was going on for a long time. I set the trap and the dumb pair of you walked right into it. Get up from there, Helen, move away from him!"

It looked like this was it. I started to yell at him and he beat me to the punch again. He didn't shoot. He just sneered, "Bannister, I don't blame you too much, we're brothers under the skin, both of us roped in. But I sort of got prior rights. I picked this babe out of the gutter.

She's my property, so I figure you owe me."

Bannister made hoarse noises in his throat, but no words came.

Wolfe walked toward him now, the gun gleaming and flickering in the lacework of moonlight. "Reach in your pocket and let's see how much change you got." There was a tinkle, and Bannister found his voice with an effort.

"I don't follow you, Wolfe. I—!"

"It's plain enough, even for a sap like you. She's *my* wife, so you owe me something. What's this—half a buck? All right, I'll take it. Consider us square, Bannister, only don't let me catch you fooling around her again. You, Helen, come along. Bannister can catch the check."

I TELL you I was sweating plenty when he put his gun away. The crazy fool. Not that the half buck gag was anything. It was an old and hackneyed story, I'd read it long ago and guessed he had, too. But this was the first time I'd ever seen it worked in real life.

I paid my check and got the hell away from there. A half mile from the Mountain Top I passed the Wolfs. He was driving along sedately like nothing had happened; she was well over in her corner of the car.

Call it simple curiosity or call it regard for Aunt Berta. I beat them back and had hardly finished telling her all about it when the Wolfe car pulled in to roost.

Two lights came on, one in the basement, one upstairs. Aunt Berta picked the upstairs and took her binoculars with her. I went into the little yard between the two houses

and peeped into the basement window.

There was a lathe and a power punch and a couple of small presses. It was like a miniature machine shop. Wolfe was working at a bench, whistling—working on the half dollar. He took a piece of gold wire and bent it around the coin, making a small loop at the top. He soldered it carefully into position. He took the keys off his key-ring—it was on one of those chains that hook over the top of your pants—and put them in his pocket. Now the only thing on the key-ring was the half dollar. He took it over to a buffer, shined it.

When he turned out the lights, I made no bones about it, I ran like hell, and a minute later was beside Aunt Berta at the upstairs window. I could see pretty good, even without the glasses.

Helen Wolfe was a crumpled knot in the middle of the bed. Wolfe came in, closed the door behind him and leaned against it. Aunt Berta repeated what he said like it was an old time silent movie and she was reading subtitles aloud to a kid.

"Look!" he snapped. "Look here, damn you! You asked if I was going to punish you and I told you I'd probably get around to it. So here's your punishment—a half buck's worth."

She raised her head from the pillow and her eyes were filled with horror. She sobbed, covered her eyes with her palms to blot out what she saw.

He was grinning there at the door and the half dollar at the end of the key-chain was rotating so fast it looked like a solid silver circle.

The guy threw back his head and

laughed and said, "A half a buck's worth!"

Then the light went out.

THE whole thing made Aunt Berta sick, though I didn't get the reason then. I got her downstairs and in bed where she had a light snack of half a devil's food cake and a quart and a half of sweet milk. Worried, I stretched out on the divan and dreamed about a guy chasing me through a black forest swinging a big half buck on a logging chain.

Next morning I got the papers for her and put on the coffee. She was feeling some better and stirred us up some pecan waffles and country sausage with fried potatoes and maple syrup, but she was on the *qui vive* and knew when Wolfe entered the kitchen. He had the coffee made and was down at the table when he must have heard his wife's footsteps. He took out the half buck and began fiddling with it.

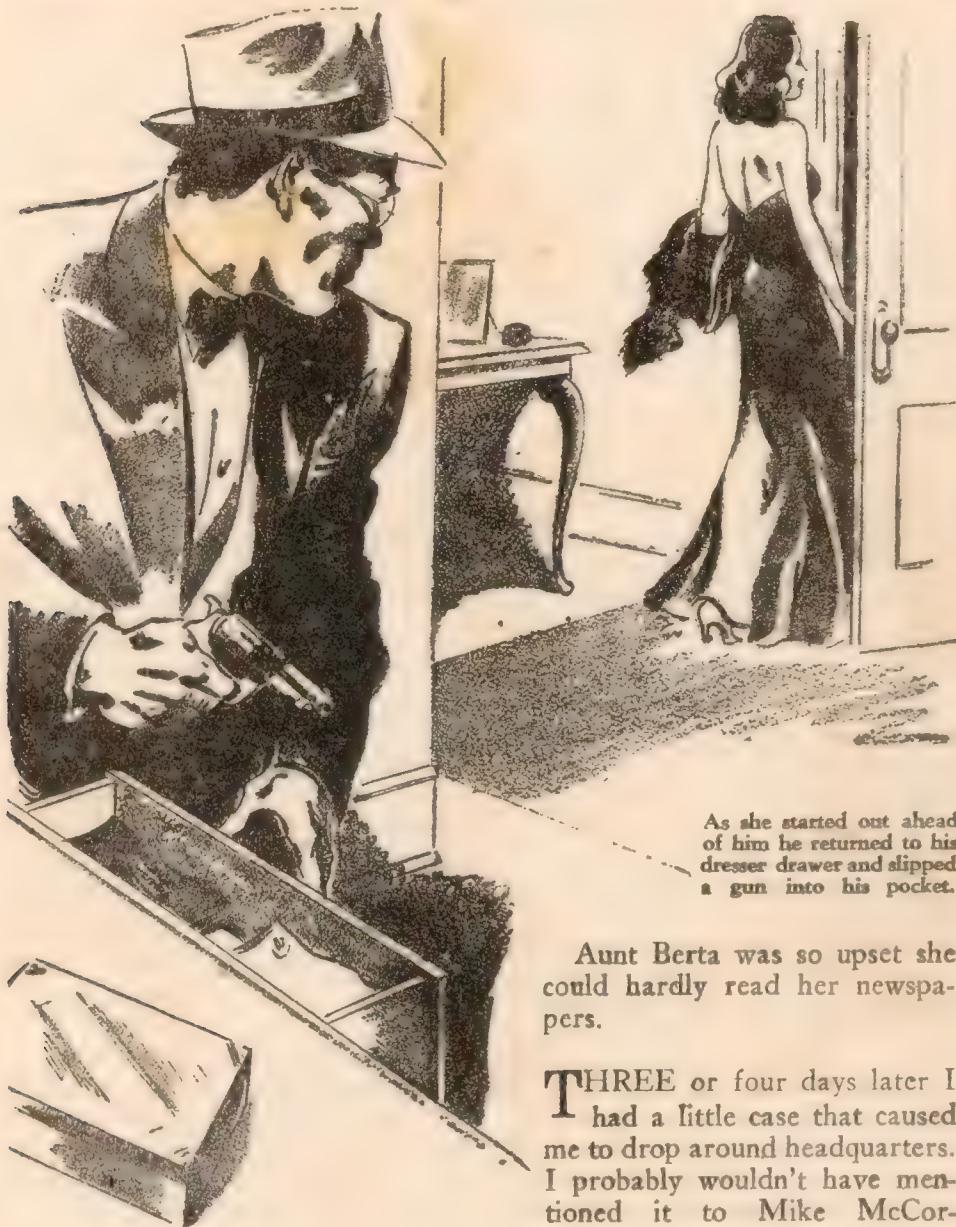
Helen Wolfe looked pretty sick, but she got his bacon and eggs for him, set them down and started to move off.

According to Aunt Berta, he said, "No appetite, my dear?"

And she said she didn't have no appetite. Even at that distance I could see his eyes fire up and his jaw muscles go white. "Then by God," he snapped, "be lady enough to sit down with me until I finish!"

She did, but I never saw a babe go through such hell. He kept fooling with that shiny coin all the time he ate and she didn't seem able to take her eyes away from it. After awhile he put on his hat and coat and kissed her on the cheek.

A minute later he stood in the



As she started out ahead of him he returned to his dresser drawer and slipped a gun into his pocket.

Aunt Berta was so upset she could hardly read her newspapers.

THREE or four days later I had a little case that caused me to drop around headquarters. I probably wouldn't have mentioned it to Mike McCormick then except he was hungry for some more of Aunt Berta's cooking and asked how about it. I told him she was so sick she could hardly eat herself and one word led to another.

"For some reason," I finished up,

morning sunlight before the garage laughing up at the window where he knew she'd be. The coin came out of his pocket. Two—four—six times he spun it before unlocking the garage and driving away.

"that half buck drives her as nutty as it does Helen Wolfe. She's going through the same thing."

Mike is smart, he took some correspondence courses and he has also been to Washington to see Mr. Hoover and garner a little FBI training.

He said, "Leggie, you're not up on your psychology. You say this Wolfe woman is pretty in a hard sort of way. Aunt Berta is living in her. All her life, due to her deafness and —ah—lack of beauty, she's been repressed. The last few years she's had a steady diet of true confessions and love stories. So the illicit love and stolen romance of the married woman is close to her. She's identifying herself with what she calls the misunderstood wife — Helen Wolfe."

It sounded logical enough, even to me. He asked how Mrs. Wolfe was taking it and I told him she wasn't. She was living on liquor and looking like the wrath of God.

The captain went over to the window with his hands behind his back. "Police work, Leggie," he said, "is pretty hidebound. A crime is committed, we work and follow clues and put the pressure on stoolies until we find the criminal and sock him in jail. But the murder has already been done, finding the criminal doesn't bring the dead party back to life. It would be a hell of a lot more logical, a hell of a lot better, if we prevented the actual murder in the first place. Take this instance: We have this guy Wolfe, inordinately jealous and vindictive. His wife, jittery and hysterical to begin with. Hysterical woman trapped by vindictive husband, maybe both of them psychopathic cases.

Playing on her nerves, for revenge, he breaks her with the half buck. For an added ingredient we have Aunt Berta, living in the woman, feeling what she feels."

Slowly I said, "Mike, you can't arrest a guy for spinning a half buck."

"Nope. I was merely pointing out that we have the perfect makings of a murder, a killing that can tangent off in any one of three directions. Husband kill wife, wife kill husband, Aunt Berta break under emotional strain and kill husband herself. If I were you, Leggie, I'd stick pretty close to that fine old aunt of mine."

HE WAS right, as usual. That gleaming half buck swinging on the end of Wolfe's key-chain was driving *two* women nuts. Aunt Berta got constantly worse. She'd sit in the darkness of the living room, binoculars trained on the house next door, her monotone drumming like rain on a tin roof.

"He can't do this to us, Helen, he can't! Damn man! Get something and smack him, Helen, he's driving us mad, mad! Pudd'n says the police can't do anything, so it's up to us! Do something, Helen! If you don't, I will!"

This Helen got to be quite a sight, all right, and Wolfe seemed to enjoy it. Her breakfast was gin. Sometimes with coffee for a chaser. I think her lunch and dinner were along the same lines.

I was there the morning she whipped up his eggs for him, bleary-eyed. He said, "Come here, my dear." She slumped over to him, and he leaned and closed the zipper of her housecoat. "Some men," he put a lot of accent on *some*, "might like

that sort of thing before breakfast but personally I don't care for it."

That was the same morning the grocery boy snickered and made some remark to me about the drunk next door, not thinking Aunt Berta was watching his lips. She whirled him half around and there was flame in her eyes. "Don't you ever call her a drunk, boy! It's that hell and tarnation man and his damned half dollar! They ought to put him in jail! They ought to shoot him! Him!" She shook her finger under the scared kid's nose. "Unless somebody else does something I'm going to do it myself! Before he drives us girls mad! Clean mad!"

Then while he went sneaking out she settled down to her papers. Seemed to me that was the only normal thing she did any more—read the papers inch by inch. The rest of the time she spent with her glasses pointed next door. Now she'd not only threatened Wolfe to me, but to the grocery boy! God help her if he turned up dead in some mysterious manner. I lost three nails on that.

A COUPLE of weeks went by, me going out nearly every night for a while, conditions remaining unchanged. Then one morning when I had nothing else to do I went out Delevan just as Wolfe was driving away. Aunt Berta was in the kitchen, looking at Helen out in the backyard.

This morning she'd dressed. You know how dames like that are, no matter what type of clothes they wear, those clothes are constructed to cause comment. She wore a sweater again, and a pair of brown slacks fitting like a coat of paint.

She even had her face fixed, though her hair was quite a mess, because as she walked, she wound the fingers of both hands in it and tugged.

Aunt Berta said indignantly to me, "He told her he was tired of seeing her looking like the wrath of God and made her go back upstairs and dress, damn him!"

Personally I thought it was a pretty good country idea. Now here she came, closer and closer, and we could see she was crying.

"Look at poor Helen, poor, poor Helen! Just look what that damned man has done to us! He's bent on driving us mad! And Helen'll be the first to go! That damned fiddle-footed man!"

And before I could stop her she went down the backsteps and blubbering over into the next yard.

Helen wailed, "Go away! Go away!"

I hesitated in the back door. Aunt Berta held her ground, said, "Ain't it awful, dearie, terrible? Damn him, he's trying to get us!" She held out her arms and by God, Helen came to them. Aunt Berta stroked her hair. "You got to eat something, dearie, you ain't been eating at all. You come with me."

I can't tell you how I felt. The woman was no good, most all that had happened was her own fault, she was the instigator. But she was what Mike McCormick would call a fixation with Aunt Berta. Hell, I couldn't give her the old heave-ho and tell Aunt Berta to quit making a fool of herself. So I did the next best thing—I stepped into the pantry.

Helen Wolfe told it over her coffee and French toast. Told it the

way such a woman could be expected to tell it. She was the misunderstood wife, the woman craving affection, she swore there was nothing wrong about the whole thing. After what I'd seen personally in that pergola! But she was taking Aunt Berta, damn her! She was building a cheap, tawdry piece of small time cheating into the romance of a lifetime, clean and beautiful and sweet. She finally got around to the pergola.

Aunt Berta, blessed old eyes glowing and lips parted, said breathlessly, "And what happened, dearie?"

"He walked in on us," snapped Helen. "What right did he have to set a trap like that, what right did he have not to trust me, his own wife?"

I almost laughed out loud. But Aunt Berta assured her the damned man had no damned right at all. So the story went on, whitewashing Helen completely, and painting the half-buck-swinging Wolfe as black as the ace of spades. At last, when it was over, Aunt Berta gulped, "Why don't you leave the lousy little blackbacked rat, Helen?"

BEFORE she could answer, I guess Aunt Berta was conscious of eyes on her back. She turned. Fred Wolfe stood in the door, his white teeth gleaming, whirling his half buck round and round at the end of his chain.

He said, "She don't leave me because I'm a good provider. She's only got to say give me this, or I want that, and she gets it. I'm not tight, just cold. I'm not human! But believe me, Fatty, as long as I keep putting, as long as I keep her

out of the gutter where I found her, she won't leave me."

I didn't move. He had his rights. He was after his wife.

He quit talking but the half buck kept spinning. Helen Wolfe got up, moved past him slowly, tired and old. She went down the back steps and across the yards into her own house. Aunt Berta couldn't get her eyes away from the gleaming circle of the half buck.

She finally sputtered, "You'll pay for this! You'll pay! Why don't you leave us alone? Can't you see you're driving us crazy?"

Now it was out. At first Fred Wolfe laughed in her face, then his eyes flamed hotter than ever, his lips drew back even farther from his teeth. "You meddling old fool, you ought to be in an institution! You—!"

That was enough. I stepped out of the pantry and said, "Hold it, Wolfe, hold it. Your wife's gone, beat it."

He looked at me while a man might have counted twenty before saying, "Sorry, mister." Then he scampered.

Aunt Berta shrilled after him, "You'll pay! You better leave me and Helen be! You damned well better! I'll get you, I'll get even!"

My God, I thought, it was complete now. Threats before me, before the grocery boy, and now to the guy's face!

I TRIED to calm her down, tried to reason with her. I tried to point out that Wolfe had caught his wife cheating on him, that he had a right to be sore, that most men would do worse than swing a half buck at

the end of a chain. I tried to tell her that Helen Wolfe was no good but it was no go.

She put her hands on her hips and said, "I can close my eyes and not get a damn' word you say. To think my own brother's boy would come to this. You call Mike McCormick on the phone and you two git over there and throw that hellish killer in the can. He is a killer, he's killing us girls just as sure as if he had a machine-gun. You going to do it?"

By golly, she was literally frothing at the mouth, she was wild-eyed. I explained for the humpty-ninth time there was nothing to arrest him for.

"If you saw a man choking his wife to death you'd do something, wouldn't you? By God and little apples, he's doing worse! Now get to a phone, Pudd'n, or make the pinch yourself."

The upshot of it was she shoved me out the front door and told me not to come back until I was willing to drag Wolfe to the gow. There was no arguing with her. She was so sore I figured she'd have a stroke if I didn't beat it.

Next day she wouldn't let me in. She couldn't understand what I was trying to tell her because she kept the chain on the door and wouldn't look at me. Her monotone came rumbling through the black slot, "You get the hell away and stay away, Pudd'n, when I want you, I'll send for you. You won't believe what I tell you and you won't do what I want you to do. You could stop a murder, now you and Mike will have to drop in after it's all over. Thank God, the rat ain't here now,

he's gone off for a few days. You get the hell away from my door, Pudd'n."

THIS is the way things sometimes happen. Next morning early I was in Mike's office trying to find out if psychology taught any way of dealing with a batty aunt. The phone rang and Mike looked surprised. He said, "It's for you." I'd left word with my office girl where I was going.

I said hello and the voice that came back was so excited that I had to slow him down some and start all over again.

He finally got it out. "Mr. Legler, your aunt, Miss Berta, has walked all the way down here to the grocery store and wants I shōuld tell you to come get her quick on account of she has got a killer located!"

I remember thinking: Murder in the making! She warned me!

I told the guy to keep her quiet—it was evident he thought she was half nuts—and I'd be right out. And in nothing flat, on my way to the door, I told Captain Mike.

He grabbed his hat. "This ought to be damned interesting from a psychological point of view," he said. "And besides there may be some left-over strudel around the house."

She was at the grocery store where she'd traded for so many years, and three clerks, the delivery boy and proprietor were trying to calm her down. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks were flushed, she looked ten years younger.

"You, Pudd'n, with your know-it-all ways! By God, I'll show you, you come along with me! Hell's bells and fireballs, I told you all the time that man was bad! Told you there

was murder in the making right next door! Him and his half dollar!"

Mike patted her shoulder and said, "There, there, Aunt Berta, Mr. Wolfe came home, eh? His wife all right?"

"Bloody bleeding well she's all right, and she's going to be all right-er! You come with me."

And all the way to the house in the department car she laughed and patted her binoculars and babbled tonelessly. All about how the garage door was open instead of locked, like he'd been too damned tired to bother with locking it. And how looking through her binoculars she'd seen the red dust and mud all over it,

I looked sorrowfully at the captain and he looked back the same way.

"Drizzling fires of hell," she snapped, "is there any red dirt and clay in this part of the country? Not till you get clear cross the state and that's where it all happened. I knew he'd been up to no good! And when I noticed the license plates in the back wasn't his—least not the ones he always uses—but wait till you see the paper."

WE HELPED her limp up the rickety front steps between us, followed her back to the kitchen. While she was getting the paper turned to the right spot, we looked out the back door cautiously. The Wolfe garage was standing open, all right, but of course neither one of us remembered what his original license number had been.

By now, Aunt Berta had her item. It wasn't much, and it was tucked away on page four, datelined clear across the state. Red clay country,

sure enough. It was a diamond company holdup, two guys, \$160,000 in cut stones.

I looked at the captain and the captain looked at me and we were both plenty uneasy. Aunt Berta said, "Holy hell, what are you waiting for? That's him, you know damn' well I'm right. And I hope you beat him up!"

We read the short article once more and there was nothing else to do but check. I went out the backdoor and across the yard giving Captain McCormick, Mike, to me, a little time. Hell, I can't believe it yet, it was just coincidence. I heard the bell tinkle in the front of the house and leaned nonchalantly against the porch post.

The rest happened plenty quick. A shot—followed by three others! I recognized the last three as coming from Mike's automatic. And me, damn me, there I was caught flat-footed snatching and fumbling at my own gun. Wolfe bounded out the backdoor with a rod in one hand and a briefcase in the other. He saw me, blasted. It zinged so close to my ear I could feel the heat of it. I stepped back instinctively and fell off the porch. He was almost to the garage when I finally got to my knees. I took him through the right shoulder with my first shot, and getting lucky, busted his right knee with the second.

The half buck was still in his pocket attached to the keychain.

The briefcase was stuffed with diamonds.

I DIDN'T get back to Aunt Berta's till late afternoon. She was in the glider, waiting and wor-



After completing the robbery he stalked along the line, blackjacking left and right.

ryng. "She'll come home any time now, Pudd'n, and then she'll be over to thank me and I'll tell her how pleased I was to do it for her. Him shooting at Captain Mike when he

rang the bell! Why, bloody my bleeding eyes, that was a dead give-away! Hunh! Don't reckon he feels so smart now, him and his drizzling half dollars!"

The evening papers came and she read with pride how Fred Wolfe, master mechanic turned cracksmen and bandit, wanted by the police of Kansas City for murder and robbery, had been located in this city and captured after a daring gun battle. There was more to it, but she didn't get to finish, for the cream convertible pulled up in front of the house. Some way it reminded me of when we first saw them. Harry Bannister was driving. Helen was sitting beside him, her skirt just as carelessly high, just as much cuticle showing as before. She got out, and sort of wiggled down into her skirt like that sort of blondes do, and went up her walk with a little swagger.

Yeah, they'd released her, there was nothing else to do. Men are as funny as women, I suppose. There was Wolfe, driving her nuts with that coin, torturing her, bearing down on her, hating her and despising her. But when the payoff came, he went to bat; he swore she had nothing to do with it, that she didn't even know his occupation. Yeah, they released her, and although she couldn't leave town she was free to come and go as she pleased.

"Yes, sir, Pudd'n," monotoned Aunt Berta complacently, "soon as she gets whatever she came after she'll come on over here and thank me with tears in her eyes. I gave him fair warning, better than he deserved. I told him right out he couldn't do me and Helen that way!"

I nodded, but I was feeling pretty miserable, I tell you.

Now she came out of the house wearing a white suit and carrying an overnight bag. Then she was getting in the car. Aunt Berta quit

swinging in sudden panic. "She'll come to see me! She ought to come to see me! There! What did I tell you!"

The cream convertible simply coasted down the slope and came to a stop before Aunt Berta's gate. The woman opened the door, came up the walk with sort of a swagger. Aunt Berta struggled to her feet. Helen Wolfe paused at arms' length; her hands on her hips, not even looking at me.

Excitedly Aunt Berta began, "Honey, I told him to his face he dassent torture us that way! I told him he better leave us be or I'd do for him! I warned him fair and square! Like Brother Herb—!"

"There's just one thing I want to know—how did you spot him?"

Helen's lips didn't shape themselves around the syllables, Aunt Berta had trouble reading them. It was like she dropped her jaw and made a black slot for the words to come out of. Fascinated, Aunt Berta watched the slot.

At last, she managed, "Spot him? Hell's bells and damnation, how many days have I been watching him spin that lousy half buck? And when I read this in the paper—read it for yourself, it's in this one with all the trimmings."

HELEN WOLFE took the paper and read an account of the robbery of the Acme Diamond Company in Kansas City. At fifteen minutes until nine o'clock Mr. Rodgers had entered his place of business—which was on the 16th floor—to find four employees with their hands in the air, a fifth on the floor with a hole in his head, killed by a silenced gun.

The lone gunman commanded Rodgers to open his vault. He told the truth, that the time lock was set for nine o'clock. For fifteen minutes the bandit had waited, capturing the mailman and an early customer during the interval. Once the safe was opened, he scooped the diamonds he wanted into a briefcase. Then, with everyone lined up facing the wall, he had gone down the line with a blackjack, bludgeoning man and woman alike. As a result, two others, one a woman, had died.

"Mr. Rodgers," continued the article, "the first to return to consciousness at the hospital, said it would be practically impossible to identify the masked bandit. Prompted by the police, however, he recalled that while the killer was cool enough in moments of action, during the fifteen minute wait for the time lock, he grew nervous. He continually swung a coin attached to a key-chain—

"Miss Berta Legler, next-door neighbor of Fred Wolfe, 1110 Delevan, having noticed—"

Helen Wolfe tossed the paper aside. "You! You!" she snarled. "You and your damned binoculars!" She snatched at the glasses hanging around Aunt Berta's neck. The string broke. She hurled them to the floor of the porch before I could stop her and stomped the fragments. "You snooping old fool," she screeched. "You prying old witch! A hundred and sixty grand in diamonds and there wouldn't have been

a kickback!" Her fingers were curled, hooked like talons. "A hundred and sixty grand!"

I said, "Scram, you blonde bum, before I hand you back to the police."

She turned and ran down the steps, leaped into the cream convertible. Gears meshed, it disappeared around the first corner.

"By damn," said Aunt Berta. "Bleeding balls of fire!" She peered down at the debris on the porch. "How much you say them things cost, Pudd'n?"

"I—why—hell, Aunt Berta," I choked, "don't worry about that, I'll get you some more myself. And the Jewelers' Association has a reward for Wolfe and you'll get it. Don't worry, she wasn't worth it!"

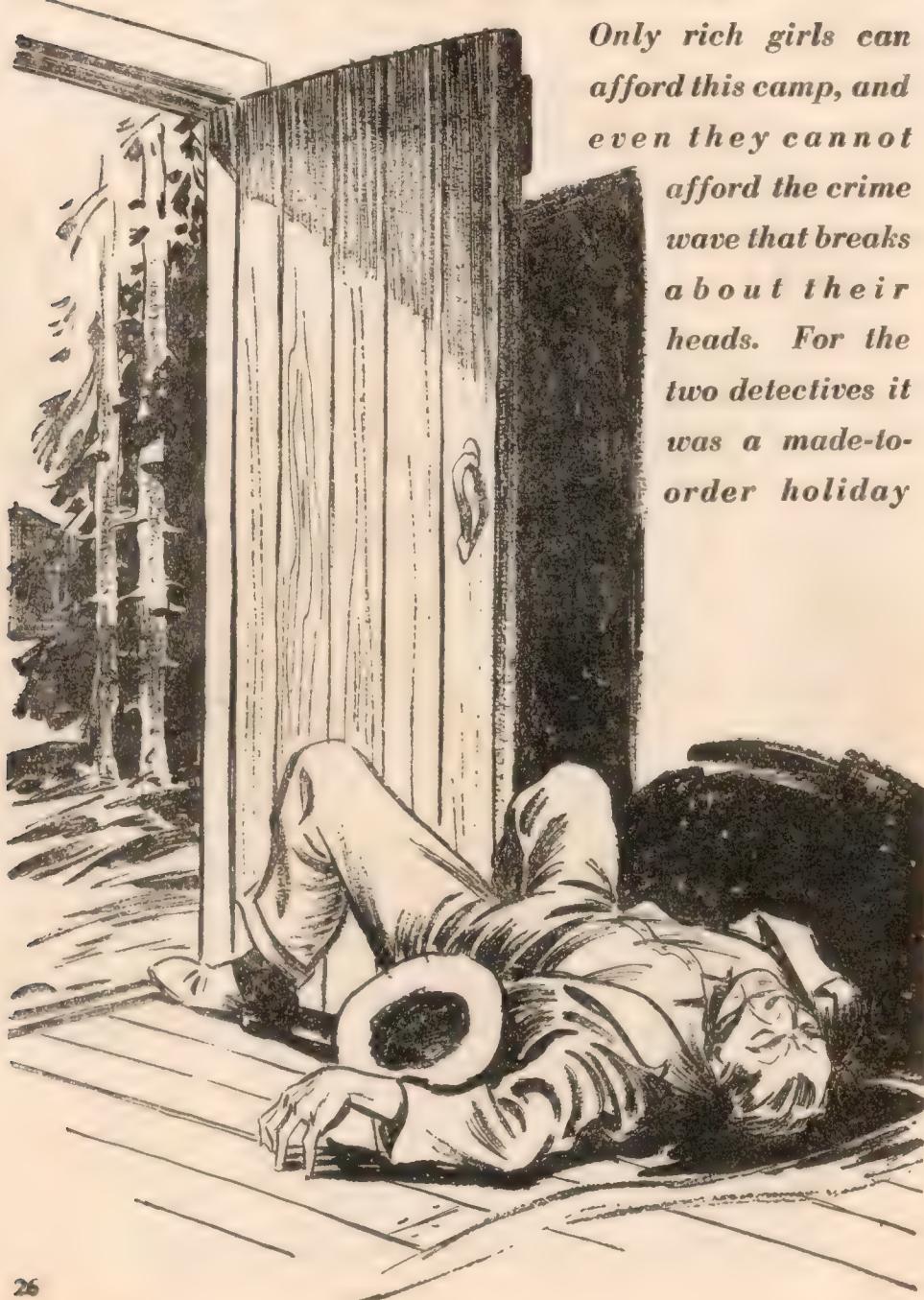
She actually smiled. "You know, Pudd'n," she said, "she was a blonde scut, wasn't she? But I'm not complaining, it was lots of fun. Only time I've had something to gripe and worry about in forty years. Reckon you could get Captain Mike on the phone? I got Swiss steak and baby peas and yams and lemon pie."

I patted her on the back and started away, headed for the phone. She said, "And bury and blast you, Pudd'n Legler, don't bother about them binoculars. Reckon the less a body knows the less they got to worry about. I can't stand the wear and tear! Why, Pudd'n, I'll bet you I don't weigh three hundred pounds!"

BUY DEFENSE STAMPS AND BONDS

MURDER'S

By ROGER TORREY



Only rich girls can afford this camp, and even they cannot afford the crime wave that breaks about their heads. For the two detectives it was a made-to-order holiday

Never Easy

The description tallied perfectly. It was the escaped lunatic, all right.



MISS CASWELL was waiting for us when we rowed in to the dock. It was the first time I'd seen her and she made me think of something the

Indians carve on their totem poles, and she had a voice that went with her gargoyle looks.

"I'm Miss Caswell," she said.

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Wallie, in his best manner.

I knew by that he was as drunk as when we'd started fishing or he'd never have bothered to have been polite to anybody that looked like Miss Caswell.

"Where is Zoa?" she next said.

Wallie rose and bowed and almost fell out of the boat. I grabbed at the rods with one hand and the side of the dock with the other and managed to save us from going over.

"Sit down," I said.

He said: "But, Sam! Not while the lady is standing!"

Miss Caswell sniffed and said: "I will not tolerate such persiflage. Where is Zoa?"

Wallie said: "Now I'll ask *you* one. What is a Zoa?"

"Zoa Barnes! I am looking for Miss Zoa Barnes."

Wallie leered at her and said: "Look in the tent, lady. Look under my bed. I always keep my girls right there, handy. You know! . . . so I can reach out at night and feel of 'em."

Miss Caswell got red in the face and turned and stalked away.

I said: "Look, Wallie, you damn' fool. She was serious. She was really looking for that girl."

"Then she's looking in the wrong place," Wallie told me. "If I had a girl hid out around here, you don't think I'd be fool enough to go fishing, do you, Sam?"

I said he'd better lay off the liquor for a while, at least . . . or that he'd be seeing the old lady with the veil stepping out of blank walls at him.

OUR next caller was official. This one was a burly red-faced, farmer-looking bird, who puffed and

wheezed as if walking from his car to our tent had him practically on his last legs.

"I'm Sheriff Connor," he introduced himself.

"I'm Sam Drake," I said, "and this is Wallie Dayton."

Wallie said: "Glad to meet you, sir. Will you join me?"

He tipped the bottle of Scotch into the paper cup he was holding, and the sheriff looked as though he had a breaking heart.

"Never touch it when I'm on duty," he said. "What you guys up here for?"

"Fishing," I said. "We heard there was bass in the lake, but we couldn't prove it this afternoon. We're going to try it early in the morning, and see if we can catch 'em before they wake up."

"I mean what are you *really* up here for?"

"I told you. For the fishing."

With that the sheriff looked sly. He nodded down the lake shore and said: "Now just because there's a girls' camp, down a piece, that wouldn't mean a thing, now would it?"

"Not to me," I said.

"It means a hell of a lot to me," said Wallie. "How old are the girls?"

"Why . . . ugh . . . eight to twenty-one."

Wallie said: "Sixteen and up isn't bad, the way I figure it. I can leave the younger ones alone. How far's this camp?"

"Why . . . ugh . . . about a mile I guess."

Wallie picked up the bottle and stood up. He was so drunk he had to take a couple of steps to catch his

balance, but he did it and took the steps in the direction the sheriff had pointed.

"Goodby, Sam," he said to me. "I'll save you one of the older ones."

I got the bottle away from him and got him into the tent, and there I whispered: "Sober up, you dope! This guy ain't making a friendly call . . . he's here on business."

"We're on a vacation," said Wallie. "And with a girl's camp just a mile away, I can see how it's going to be a glorious one."

He settled down on his blankets and I went back to the fire and the sheriff.

"What's it all about," I asked.

HE SAID: "I'm looking for Miss Zoa Barnes. And I don't want no foolishness, young fella. Miss Caswell told me what you said to her this afternoon, and I don't want you to make any talk to me like you done to her. I want that girl."

I said, "Sheriff, we never heard of the girl before in our lives. Who is she and why did she skip out? And why should this Miss Caswell suspect us of knowing anything about it?"

"Well . . . ugh . . . I take it the girl is sort of man-crazy. Miss Caswell, she thought that the girl'd be around some man."

I said nothing but waited for him to go on.

"So I want to know what you fellas are doing up here. Now don't give me no fancy story, young fella. I got ways of finding out the truth."

I figured I might as well save him some bother, so I dug out my private card and started telling him things.

CHAPTER II

A Strong-minded Woman



HE sheriff tugged his mustache lop-sided and gave me what was supposed to be a shrewd look. It didn't make him appear one bit brighter, unfortunately.

"I'm to take it, then," he said, that you claim to be a private investigator named Sam Drake and that this fella with you is another one of the same, and that he's supposed to be named Wallace Dayton."

"Not supposed to be, sheriff. That's who we are."

"And you're supposed to be up here fishing."

"Not supposed to be . . . we are up here fishing."

"And I'm supposed to believe that."

"Well, that's up to you. I've shown you our credentials."

"Them things can be faked, young fella. And even if you are what you say you are, how'm I to know you ain't up here working for old man Barnes?"

"You don't. I don't know old man Barnes, though, if that means anything."

"What you tell me don't mean nothing, young fella. How do I know you ain't up here chasing one of these girls, if you ain't up here chasing the Barnes girl?"

"You don't."

"I'm going to keep an eye on you fellas, you can believe me on that."

I said, "You fat stiff! I sat here and answered your questions politely, and you give me that. Now get the hell out of here! We've

got a right to camp here and we've got a right to choose our company."

"Now young fella, I'm the sheriff."

"Get the hell out of my camp before I throw you out."

"Now you don't need to get huffy. After all, you ain't got no legal right to get sore at the sheriff."

I stood up and so did he. I moved toward him and he scuttled away toward his car. But at that he had the last word, and he took it just before he drove away. He leaned out of his car to shout at me.

"You fellas keep away from that camp, d'ya hear me?"

I shouted back, "They probably hear you at the camp, if it's only a mile away."

"You mess around there and I'll put charges against you."

I pretended to start for his car and he drove off in a cloud of dust. And then I went back in the tent and woke up Wallie.

"Look, Dayton," I said. "I'm going down to that camp."

"I'm going with you," he mumbled. "I'm lonesome, too."

You stay here, you dope. I'm going down there on business."

"I like that kind of business, too," he said, struggling to get out of his blankets. "I like that kind of business—morning, noon, and nights."

"You stay here. I'm going down and talk to that Miss Caswell."

He must have remembered how that old battle-ax looked, because he gave a groan and dug back under cover.

MISS CASWELL had her office in an over-sized tent set in a cluster of smaller ones, and the little

girl that was guiding me pointed it out with awe.

"That's it," she said. "That's the office."

I said: "Thank you, little girl," and handed her a dime, without thinking. She handed it back to me very gravely and said: "I'm Barbara Smedgley, sir. I'm sure you've made a mistake."

That was a name I knew . . . the Smedgley family had dollar bills from the first printing press, and they'd been saving them carefully ever since.

I said: "Pardon me."

She said: "Oh, that's quite all right."

So I went in to see Miss Caswell with my face already red.

MISS CASWELL looked me up and down as if I smelled, then said: "What is it, please? I am a busy woman . . . please state your business promptly."

"I want to apologize for this afternoon," I said. "My friend, well, the real reason I'm up here is to get him off a drunk. He didn't understand."

"He didn't understand what?"

"That you were serious about Miss Barnes being missing."

"And how does that concern you, young man?"

"Well, you came over and asked about her."

"You will forget the matter. You . . . you are not connected with a newspaper, by any chance?"

"I am not."

She looked relieved.

"But I'm a private cop, Miss Caswell, and I have a notion I can help you."

"I need no assistance."

I shrugged and said: "Well, in that case, I might as well telephone a friend of mine that works on one of the papers. I can tell him about you being over and I can tell him about the sheriff being over, and how you both told me Miss Zoa Barnes was missing. I'll say good evening, then."

She didn't waste any words. She just said: "What are your charges?"

WE GOT the set-up the next morning, after I had a strenuous time with Wallie. After he'd taken two glasses of tomato juice and three cups of black coffee, I let him have one little pick-up drink. Then I made him go down to the lake and swim out to an island that was at least a quarter of a mile offshore, and, by the time he got over that and was dressed, he looked halfway human and talked fairly intelligently. At least as much as he ordinarily does. I didn't even bother to tell him what was doing until that was over.

And then I said: "We've got a job. This girl that's missing is one of the Chicago Barnes, if that means anything. All it means to me is that her family's got a lot of dough and that we're hired to find her. Boiled down from what that horse-faced Caswell told me it comes to this. She's a man-crazy little wench and the Caswell woman is afraid she's run off with some guy. She don't want any scandal, because the girl is prominent. There's only the father and another sister . . . the mother is dead. So we're hired to see if everything's all right . . . whether the girl is just out

having a time for herself or whether there's something really wrong."

"There's no harm in a girl having fun," argued Wallie. "It stands to reason she couldn't have any real fun unless she had a man along to have fun with. I should have got here before. . . . I could maybe have helped her out some."

And then the sheriff drove up and came out of his car, but not alone. He had a big raw-boned duck with him wearing a deputy's badge, and he introduced him with ostentation.

"This is Deputy Warner," he said.

Both Wallie and I said we were glad to meet Deputy Warner.

"Thought I'd better have Warner along with me, long's this is an official call," he said. "Where was you fellas yesterday morning?"

"Driving up," I said. "We got here about noon, and as soon as camp was set we went fishing."

"Can you prove it?"

"Prove we were fishing?"

"Prove you was driving up?"

"We got gas a couple places down the road, and I used a Standard Oil credit card. That ought to do it, sheriff."

He looked disappointed.

I said: "Not that we *have* to prove it. I'm just telling you that to show you we're trying to get along."

He said: "I guess maybe you got to prove it at that. The undertaker says the Barnes girl has been dead since yesterday morning."

Wallie said: "And there goes our job."

Miss Caswell proved Willie wrong, and in short order. She came trudging up the road past the

sheriff's car and to us, and she started giving orders while she was yet ten feet away.

"I want you, sheriff," she said, "to start at once and question the local people. I don't want you to be satisfied with any vague stories. . . . I want to know exactly where every single one of them was and what they were doing yesterday morning when Zoa was murdered. And you, Mr. Drake, I wish you would come back to the camp with me. You and your friend, providing he is in decent shape instead of in the condition I found him yesterday. I have other plans for you."

"See here," said the sheriff. "I guess maybe you don't understand, Miss Caswell. This here thing is a murder and the sheriff's office is in charge and I can't have no interference in my duty."

"Don't say that. Don't say you 'can't have no interference.' Say, rather, 'can't have *any* interference.' It is as easy to be grammatical, sheriff. You will please do as I have instructed. . . . I have decided the proper course to follow."

"What's that, ma'am?" asked he.

"We will keep the finding of Zoa's body a secret. I have already notified her father by telephone of her death, and he is flying here now. We will have no notoriety at present. You will do as I have told you to do."

"I got to tell the State cops," he objected.

She said: "Very well. Instruct them, however, that the matter is secret. Mr. Drake, you and Mr. Dayton will please come with me."

"You guys stay right here. I got some more questions to ask you."

"Please follow me, Mr. Drake."

"I said: "Sheriff, you lose. This is the lady I work for. When you get a warrant, or any reason to apply for one, then come and talk to us. Or wait until we get through and we'll talk to you then."

"What you got to do?"

Miss Caswell said: "I will tell them what I want . . . it does not concern you, sheriff."

She turned and started back toward her camp and Wallie and I started after her. And as we left, we heard the sheriff speak to his deputy, and he sounded very bitter.

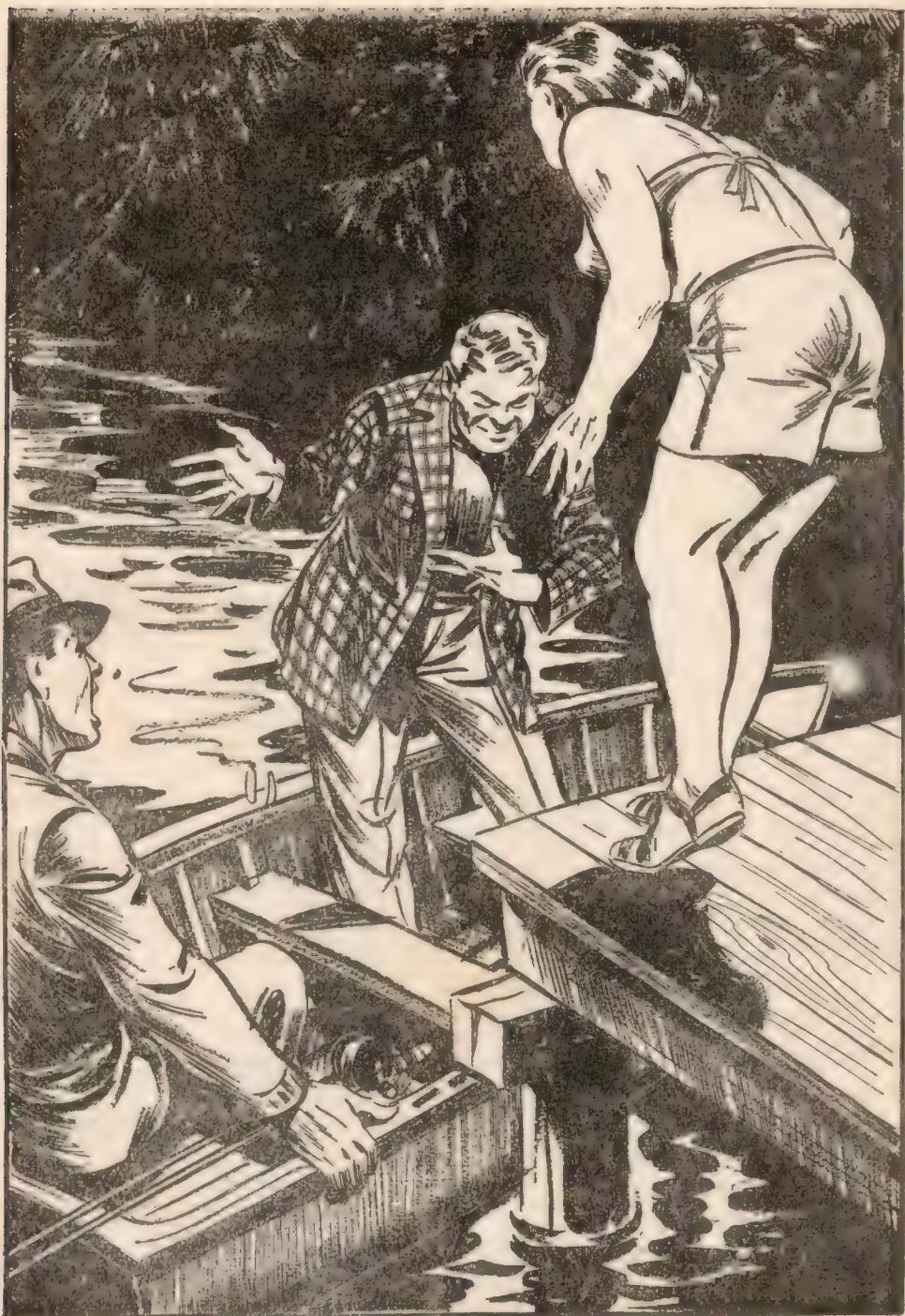
"That's what comes," he said, "of mixing a woman in a simple little murder case."

CHAPTER III

Another Dead One!



E MET the employees first because Miss Caswell insisted on it. Three men and half a dozen women, and they ranged from the riding master to a colored wench who helped around the kitchen. Miss Caswell questioned them while Wallie and I listened in . . . which was also her idea. Outside of the cook . . . an Irish biddy named Mary, and the colored woman, none of them had more than a vague alibi for the morning before, when the Barnes girl had been killed. This was proper. If they all had been doing what they were hired to do, they naturally would have been back and forth around the place and couldn't be exact about it. She finally told them they could go and, when they'd left, turned to us.



I said, "Sit down, Wallie!" and he said,
"Not while the lady is standing, Sam."

"Now that is my first step," she said. "I will explain the theory I am developing. I intend to have the guilty person believe he, or she, is under suspicion. You will note I questioned these people and gave that impression. I acted as if I believed each and every one of them was guilty of the crime."

"That'll get you what?" I asked.

"That will naturally make the guilty person tremendously upset. He, or she, will believe he overlooked some essential clue. The guilty person will betray himself through nervousness."

I started to say something but Wallie was ahead of me. I was afraid of it; afraid he'd lose his temper. He was bearing up under a stunning hang-over anyway, and his nerves were none too good at best.

"Look, you," he said. "You may be a big shot among the girl school mucky-mucks, but you don't rate in a thing like this. You started out by telling the sheriff off, and he's got the law back of him. He's a dope, and all that, but that was a mistake. He's still the law. Then you sent orders by him to the State Police, and they won't take 'em from you. You treat us like Sam was feeble-minded Joe and I was his little brother, and you won't get any results from us that way, either. And then, to cap it off, you put these employees in such a state we'll play hell learning a thing from 'em. After this, sister, you just sit back and let somebody handle this that knows how."

I thought the old girl was going to have apoplexy. She tried to talk but all she could do was stutter, and her face went into a light shade of

purple. But she did as well, saving her breath, because Wallie wasn't through.

"The trouble with a gal like you," he said, conversationally, "is that you never been around a man. That's what's soured you . . . that's what's given you this notion that you know such a much. You don't know anything about the things that count. You can't know it because you never had a man to teach you. If you want Sam and me to handle this business, you keep out from under foot from now on. Come on, Sam, get at it."

WITH that he got up and strolled out of the tent . . . and I went with him. I had to . . . if I'd stayed I'd have had to bear the brunt of Miss Caswell's kick-back, and I didn't have the heart for it. I admired Wallie for the way he'd talked but I also figured he'd talked us right out of a job along with it . . . and that might have been true if the next break didn't happen right then and there.

A little girl of about ten met us and stood still, looking at us gravely. She seemed undecided whether to speak or not, so Wallie broke the ice. He'd probably have done a better job of getting acquainted if she'd been a few years older, but he did all right at that.

"Hello, little girl," he said.

"Are you a detective?" she asked.

"What makes you think I'm that?"

"Well, because of Zoa Barnes being murdered and all."

"You're right. . . . I'm a detective."

I said: "That's open to argument, Wallie."

The little girl said: "I wouldn't want to tell you anything if you weren't. But a good citizen is supposed to help the law officers, and that is the reason why I asked if you were one."

Wallie said: "Don't mind Mr. Drake . . . he's just trying to be funny. I'm a law officer, or I'll do until one comes along. What's happened?"

"It's Barbara Smedgley. I think she's dead. I think she's been murdered, too."

Miss Caswell came out of the tent in time to hear this. She snapped out: "What's that?"

"Well, Miss Caswell, she's on her cot and her head is all bloody and I couldn't feel any pulse or see any sign of breathing. So I think she's dead."

Miss Caswell said: "My God!"

I said: "Look, honey, suppose you show us."

Miss Caswell said, faintly: "Please don't speak to my girls like that, Mr. Drake. I will not permit any familiarity in the way you address them."

Wallie said: "Oh, shut up, sister. Come on, hon, show us."

"Certainly," said the little girl.

Miss Caswell tagged along.

THE little Smedgley girl had been murdered all right. Her head had been smashed in with the well-known blunt instrument and that's a nasty way of dying and it's ten times worse when the victim is a child. Her little head was in a pool of blood that was just starting to film over and she was still warm. There was just the cot she was on and another in the tent, along with some hanging shelves

and two wardrobe trunks that did for closet space.

We had the little girl stay outside while we looked at this, and then I went out and asked: "Is that your tent, too, honey?"

"Oh, yes. Barbara and I were tentmates. There's just two of us in each tent, you see, if we pay the extra money."

"I see."

"I was walking with Miss Hodges . . . it's bird study time now, you know . . . but I didn't feel well and Miss Hodges said I might go back to the tent and lie down. That's when I found Barbara."

"I see."

"I think that Barbara was killed because of the secret she knew. Because she was telling us she had a secret that she was going to tell the detectives."

"That seems likely. What was the secret?"

"It was a secret, so I wouldn't know it. Barbara wouldn't tell anybody. But it was something she saw the other evening, and it was something about Zoa Barnes, because when we heard that Zoa was murdered is when Barbara spoke of having the secret. So that makes me think it had something to do with Zoa."

"Very likely."

"Will I have to stay in this same tent, now?"

"Certainly not."

"Because I'd be afraid."

"I can understand that, too. Now who is Miss Hodges?"

"She's my mentor."

"Your what?"

Miss Caswell said from behind me: "I will answer your questions,

Mr. Drake. You need not ask a little child. Miss Hodges is one of the young ladies who assist me."

"A teacher?"

"More a companion."

"I see."

Then the old girl proved human. Her face started to work and she put her hands up in front of it to cover her crying and blurted out: "Oh, the poor little baby! Poor little Barbara! I simply can't think of it."

Eight or eighty, it was all the same to Wallie, apparently. He put his arm around her shoulders and said: "There, there! Cry on Wallie's shoulder . . . you'll feel better. Come on, show me where your tent is and I'll help you there. You'd better lie down and cry it out. Come on, now!"

She muttered: "Over there," and gave a vague wave, and away they went with Wallie helping her along like she was young and pretty and something he'd always wanted. He didn't even have the grace to wink at me as he left.

It would have been funny if it hadn't been pathetic. She was fifty if she was a day, and I'm willing to bet that was the first time in her life she ever was anywhere near that close to a man.

CHAPTER IV

Ghoul's Work



E PASSED the sheriff about two miles in from camp and that was what we wanted. We didn't think he'd feel much like cooperating, and we didn't want to listen to his foolish

questions. And on the way, Wallie gave me his ideas about Miss Caswell.

"She ain't as bad as she looks," said he. "Like I told her, the trouble with her is that she never really knew a man. I'll bet that if the right man took hold, even now, he could make something of that old dame."

"He'd have to be a hound for punishment," I said. "She'd have been hard to take if she was twenty years younger."

"That's where you're wrong," said Wallie. "I know. Those homely ones are grateful for a little attention. They love you to death if you give 'em a kind word. You wait and see."

I looked at him and couldn't believe it. I didn't think Wallie, who was capable of almost anything to my certain knowledge, could contemplate what he certainly was. I knew a lot of things he was guilty of and suspected a lot more but this was a new low.

I said: "You mean you're going to give that old dame a play?"

"She's the boss, ain't she?"

"Well, yes."

"We want the job, don't we?"

"Well, sure."

He grinned evilly and said: "Then all I'll be doing is insuring it. I'm a Boy Scout and I'm doing a good deed for all concerned."

I told him what he really was and that was something that used language and took up the time the drive into Severn rated. It's one of the towns that are four blocks long and four blocks wide and where everybody calls everybody else by his first name, so it didn't take us long to find the undertaker and coroner.



He may not have had many brains, but he had the sort of looks the girls went for.

Who did business under the name of *William B. Smith . . . Mortician*.

WILLIAM B. looked like something out of *Pickwick Papers* and Wallie started right out referring to him as Mysterious Billy Smith. The original Mysterious Billy was a pretty good prizefighter, but our Severn character wasn't the bruiser type. He was a little fat red-faced smiling man, who rubbed his hands together as though he liked the feel of himself. He drew one through the other lingeringly, while he talked to us, and he kept chuckling to himself as if the very thought of young girl corpses was a merry thing.

"Ah, yes, ah, yes," he said. "The young Miss Barnes! A beautiful body, gentlemen, a beautiful body."

"A which?" asked Wallie.

"A body, you dope," I said.

"She is beautiful even now, gentlemen. I take it you are members of the immediate family."

"Wrong," said Wallie.

I was watching a white State Police car make the turn that put it on the road that led to camp.

"Representing the family, then?" said William B., persisting.

"Wrong again," said Wallie.

William B. took another wring at his hands. "But who, gentlemen, or should I say what? I mean, you see, I really can't let everyone look at the body. It isn't done."

"We're cops," said Wallie, not

bothering to explain we were cops but private ones.

William B. looked doubtful.

"Enough of this," I said, showing Mr. Smith a flash of a police courtesy card. "We want to see her. So suppose you show us. We've got to get back to the scene of the last murder, Mr. Smith, so you'll pardon our haste."

"Another murder?"

"That's right."

"Another . . . another young lady?"

"Right again."

"Ah . . . ugh . . . a young lady?"

"Still right."

THE ghoulish little heel looked like he was just entering the Kingdom of Heaven, so I spoiled it for him.

"A very young lady," I added. "Not over ten years old."

"A child?" he said, acting as if the wind was going out of him. I see . . . only a child."

And with that he took us in to see Zoa Barnes . . . and he had to shoo the crowd away.

I think he'd charged admission, because it looked as if half the young men of Severn were gathered around the body. I took one look and got the idea, and then I spoke and made it sound official.

"You guys get the hell out of here," I said, "and stop, one at a time at the door and leave your names with my partner. Dayton, take their names and addresses. I'll show you men something about the laws of this land. You've come in here and looked at a girl with no clothes on, and you'll find it's the most expensive look you ever took in

your life. There's a law against this sort of thing, you know."

One of them who owned a particularly unpleasant whiny voice said: "I never heard of no law about such a thing."

"Take this man's name first, Dayton," I said. "You've heard now, mister. It comes under the decency laws, if you know what *they* are. This is going to cost you a pretty penny."

Then I stood back and looked stern, while they filed past Wallie and left their names. They all looked scared to death. The undertaker went out with the last of them, apparently telling them he'd see what he could do to straighten things up, and then Wallie sidled over to me.

"Are you nuts, Sam?" he asked. "I never heard of any law like that."

I said: "Neither did I."

"You said there was one."

"Well, maybe there is. I can throw a scare into 'em anyway, can't I?"

William B. came back and waved his hand and said: Well, gentlemen, there she is. I hope you won't be too hard on the boys . . . in a way their being here was official. I wanted to be sure the girl was properly identified, you see."

"How could that crowd help?"

"Why, the young lady was around our city a good deal," he said. "A lot of our local boys knew her, naturally. I dare say that she had been friendly with practically all you saw here."

"She got around," said Wallie. "That it?"

William B. said simply: "She did indeed. I knew her, myself."

I figured that was the height of something or other, too.

SHE'D been stabbed, twice. Once over the heart and once in the throat. I figured the last was meant as a finisher. Of course William B. had washed the blood away while fixing her up, and the stab wounds showed only as little purple lines. He explained this last.

"You see how I fixed them?" he asked us. "You see how I drew the lips of the gashes together, thus preparing the way for the flesh paint I will use to cover the actual entrance point? A beautiful example of our work, gentlemen. A lovely little body to work with."

"And a lovely big bank account in the family," Wallie said. "D'ya charge like a doctor does . . . what you think the traffic'll bear?"

"My rates are very reasonable."

"You should give Miss Caswell's camp wholesale rates. They're giving business to you in bunches."

Then a State Police sergeant walked in and gave us a hard look and spoke to William B.

"What are these men doing here?"

"Why they're police officers."

He turned to us, and Wallie said hurriedly: "Well, yes, in a way. We're retained by Miss Caswell, sergeant."

"Get the hell out."

"Sure," said Wallie.

I said: "There's just one thing I'd like to know. Was the girl attacked?"

The sergeant looked at William B., who blushed and said: "There was no evidence of anything like that."

"Why'd you ask that?" the sergeant said to me. He was one of the hard-boiled young ones who make police work a career, and I could see he didn't care for us any more than we cared for him.

"There's a home for the criminally insane not over five miles from here," I said. "I was thinking of that. They let the boys out and around, of course with guards and all that, but I figured there might be a chance of one of them getting away."

"I've thought of that," the sergeant said, which was a mark against him in Saint Peter's book. I could tell from the look he had that this was the first time the idea had entered his mind. "I've thought of that . . . I intend to call them at once and make the proper inquiries."

I said: "Let's go, Wallie."

William B. said to the sergeant, in that lush voice of his: "A wild young girl but a beautiful one, officer. A beautiful body. Much like her sister; her sister was a wild young thing, too."

"You know her, too?"

"But, yes. Very well." With that he let a reminiscent smile loose all over his fat face. "Much as I knew this young girl. Two wild young things, gentlemen. Knowing never a repression . . . true children of nature, they both were."

"How long ago did you know this sister?"

"Why, last year. When she was at camp."

"She got around like this one did, that it?"

"Why, yes."

"Another pants-chaser," said Wallie.

Wallie always believed in calling a spade a spade.

CHAPTER V

A Few Pointed Questions



THIS FIRST sight our camp looked like we'd left it, but when we went in the tent we found out different. Our two bags had been overturned with the contents dumped out on the floor-cloth, and nothing had been replaced. The case of whiskey that Wallie had under his camp cot had been pulled out and Wallie claimed the bottle he'd been working on last was down two inches or more. Some loose papers I'd had in my bag had been gone through, and this was true with Wallie, too. Some of the pockets in the clothes I had hanging on stretchers were turned out, and I knew I hadn't left them that way. All in all, somebody had gone through our stuff, searching for the Lord knew what.

Wallie was shoving the whiskey case back under the cot and muttering about people who were low enough to steal a man's whiskey.

I said: "Sneak thieves, only they didn't steal anything. Just a check-up, I'd say."

Wallie took his half full bottle out of the tent and to the water pail, where a chaser would be handy, and I thought it over a minute and joined him. A drink would be in order, I figured, because we were going to have to do a little planning on future action . . . and we were standing there with Wallie holding the bottle by the neck when the shooting started.

The bottle shivered into fragments and the gun shot came in behind it like an echo, Wallie stood there looking down at the neck of the bottle as if he'd lost a rare jewel, and said: "Geeze!"

I said: "What the hell!"

The next slug smashed into our coffee pot which was sitting on the Coleman stove, and coffee grounds sprayed over us when the pot went up into the air.

"Wallie said: "We'd better duck."

"We'd better stand still," I told him. "If we move, the guy might get us on the wing. He's not serious yet."

I wasn't so sure, but that was what I was hoping, at least. We were out in the open and the tent would have been no protection at all . . . the rifleman could have riddled it and he'd have been bound to have connected with one of us, at least.

Wallie yanked out his gun and glared at the woods, and I said: "Put it away, you dope! You can't match a rifle with that. Put it away!"

The next slug went through the water pail and Wallie dropped his gun like it was hot.

AND then I saw the sign.

A It was written on a paper bag that had held a loaf of bread, and it was short and simple. *Get out and stay out. You are not wanted here. Get out and save trouble for all.*

It was unsigned, naturally, and it was printed out crudely in block letters that a child could have drawn, and it was stuck onto a dead limb on a little tree right in front of us, where we should have seen it when we first walked in.

We read it and the shooting

stopped and Wallie pointed out the obvious.

"He wanted us to read his little letter," he said.

"So now we've read it."

"So now what do we do?"

"We give it to the State cops. I doubt if the sheriff can read or write . . . and he certainly wouldn't know what to do about a thing like this."

"I think you're wrong," Wallie objected. "I think we ought to show it to Miss Caswell and ask her for more money, on the grounds that we're in danger."

I said: "It's an idea, all right."

Wallie had been drifting over to the side, where there was a clump of trees and shelter. He dropped to the ground here, where he was shaded by a little swell, and pulled his gun and let go all six of the shells it held at the thicket that had held the hidden rifleman. It caught me flat-footed and I dived for shelter and got there just as Wallie loosed the last of the six.

"You damn' fool!" I said. "Why didn't you tell me you were going to pull a caper like that? I was out in the open and caught short."

"I was safe," he said, grinning. "I didn't expect to hit him, but at least it'll go to show him we're fighting back."

He hadn't got a return and we figured the ambush was over, so we went over there and looked around for empty shells that had held the slugs fired at us, and we found them behind a windfall . . . where the hidden gunman had crouched to do his shooting. Slim, vicious-looking brass cases, 25-35 in calibre. It's not a big gun but it's deadly at a distance like that in the hands of anyone who

knew how to shoot like that shooter did.

I said to Wallie: "He could have drilled us neat and clean at that range. He just wanted to give us a scare."

"Did he?" asked Wallie.

I told the truth. "He did," I said.

"Me, too."

"So we quit, eh?"

Wallie looked startled and said: "Hell, no! That old gal needs help. And that means in more ways than one."

I told him he had a dirty mind . . . and he was honest enough to admit it.

THE three men at the camp were the riding master, the guy that drove the camp bus and looked after the Delco plant and the other machinery, and a half-witted monkey named Gould, who was supposed to be a swimming instructor. He was built like a million and looked like a picture in swimming trunks, but he had adenoids or something and they made his teeth stick out in front, and this interfered with his speech. At least it was either the teeth that bothered him or the way he kept trying to grin at me while I was talking to him.

"Yeah, I was friendly with the Barnes girl," he told me, with that silly grin. "I'm friendly with all the girls. Like a big brother to 'em, I am."

"That right?"

"I . . . ugh . . . might as well tell you. It's something you'd maybe find out, anyway."

"We'd find it out for sure," I said. "Whatever it is we'd find it 'out. That's our business. What is it?"

"I . . . ugh . . . tried to make a date with her once."

"S-o-o-o?"

"She said no."

"Was that all?"

"Well, no. She said she could do better than me, and that if she thought she couldn't, she'd cut her own throat. She was sort of mad, I guess."

"Sounds it. Were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Mad."

"Oh, no. If one of them don't go out, there's others that will."

"What about these mentors? Aren't they supposed to keep the girls from going out like that?"

"They go out themselves, mister. All of 'em. And besides that, how can they watch the girls, with the girls living in tents like this? All a girl has to do is pull up the back of the tent and roll out under it, and there she is with ten thousand acres in front of her. If they want to get out, they get out."

"They do much of that sort of thing?"

He grinned, which made him look a lot homelier but at least a little brighter.

"You'd be surprised, Mr. Drake. They go out plenty."

"With who? That is, besides yourself?"

"You can't get a room in Severn, so help me, while the camp is running here. Didn't you notice there ain't no FOR RENT signs up there? The guys that run around with the girls at home follow 'em up here to camp and get rooms in the village."

"You're nuts."

"Some of 'em do, anyway."

That seemed reasonable and I said

so. I asked: "What about this Barnes girl? Was she playing around with some guy?"

"With a lot of 'em, Mr. Drake. Her sister was, too. But her sister was nuts about Billy Thompson before she left last year . . . she gave all the other guys the go-by for him. You know Billy?"

"The guy that teaches riding?"

"Sure. He's playing around this year with one of the mentors . . . a gal named Hodges. Marian Hodges, and she's a nice looking dish in her own right, if you ask me. I don't see why he'd cheat on her, but he does, all right."

I WASN'T particularly interested in the riding master's love life, but I had this big lout talking and I wanted to keep him at it.

"One of those wolves, eh, this Billy?"

"He gets around, Mister Drake, just plenty. It was the Barnes girl last year and this year it's the field, though he gives Marian Hodges the best play."

"Were both Barnes girls here last year?"

"Sure. Zoa and Fay, both. Fay's the oldest . . . she's too old to go this year, I guess. She's about twenty. . . . Zoa was only nineteen."

"Did this Billy give Zoa any play?"

"Maybe . . . I don't know. She asked for it. . . . I wouldn't have propositioned her for a date myself, except she just the same as asked for it. Then she turned me down."

"And you didn't get sore?"

The big clown grinned and said: "Mister, with two hundred girls in this here camp, besides about twenty

more than look after the two hundred, would I get sore because one of them said no. Look at all of 'em who say yes."

I said the thought was staggering . . . and started to leave with it. And then I remembered something else and stopped.

"You got a gun?" I asked.

"Sure. Two of 'em."

"What kind?"

"Well, I got a .22 pump and I got a 25-35 Winchester carbine. It's a dandy little deer gun, if you can shoot and don't try it too far. You want to borrow it?"

"D'ya lend it?"

"Sure."

"Have you lately?"

"Well, no. But it's in my tent and anybody can borrow it that wants to. I loaned it to Billy and I loaned it to Zed, too. They shoot it at targets."

I said I might want to borrow it myself, later on, and left it at that. At least it spotted the gun that had probably been used to scare us with at our camp . . . but I didn't think this swimming wonder was the one who'd used it. I didn't give him credit for brains enough to shoot that close to us and miss us, the way the shooter had.

CHAPTER VI

Wallie Makes Time!

N THE way up from the lake I saw Wallie with a blond wench that was about the nicest looking girl I'd seen that far. He had his head down, talking fast and apparently to the point, because they passed within



The little Smedgley girl had been murdered, all right.

thirty feet of me and neither of them saw me. The gal was wearing one of those sweater and skirt arrangements like the Hollywood baby stars get photographed in, and she didn't have a thing to be ashamed about as far as filling the rig out . . . though she wasn't one bit too fat.

Just pleasingly plump.

Wallie had that well-known look on his face and I could see he was getting along fine . . . and then I saw the cars lined up in front of the office tent and forgot all about him.

IT WAS Zoa Barnes' father and sister Fay, along with three cars full of State cops, our undertaker, William B. Smith, and a dozen reporters from the city papers. I met one of them just as he dashed out and into the car he'd chartered, and it happened to be a man I knew.

"In a rush, eh, James?" I said.

He was Jimmy Eldridge of the *News*, and he looked like a little boy turned loose in a candy store.

"My God, Sam!" he said. "It's a natural, and it comes when there's nothing to talk about except what Roosevelt is going to do next. It's a honey."

"Yeah!"

"It's a darb, no less. Here's the Barnes girl goes first, and then goes the little Smedgley girl. And here's two maniacs loose from the asylum, only five miles away in an air line."

"I didn't know that."

"The State cops let it out. I should get a bonus on the yarn I'm sending in."

"Do the cops place these two crazy men around here?"

"Not yet, but they don't have to. Can't my readers dream? Have

they no imagination? Are they clods, to be held down to facts, when no less a man than Eldridge is giving them the story?"

"You're drunk."

"Well, yes. But it's your pal Dayton that got me that way. While I was waiting, I went over to your fishing camp and we had a few. Wallie gave me some stuff I can use, too . . . only he wants me to put it so it advertises you guys."

"What did he tell you?"

Eldridge grinned and said: "Plenty, just plenty . . . and plenty that I don't quite get. For one thing he said he had a gold mine here that had never been worked. D'ya know what he meant?"

I thought of Miss Caswell and her maiden heart and undoubted bank balance and said I understood it full well.

"And he said he had an idea about who killed the two girls and that he had a way of working it out all planned."

"That's news to me."

"He said he was going to bore from within."

I THOUGHT of Wallie being out with the sweetheart of a blond gal and grinned. I had an idea of what he meant by that, too, but I didn't see where it had any connection with the case.

"And he said the local undertaker, who's also the coroner, I take it, would bear watching. He called him a mysterious character."

"You *are* drunk," I said. "Wallie's got him mixed up with Mysterious Billy Smith, the prizefighter. They got the same name."

"Maybe I got that balled up. Any-

way, I took it Wallie didn't like him."

"Wallie thinks Mysterious Billy has a dirty mind, that's all."

"Honest?"

"That's the only reason."

"My God!" said Eldridge. "That from Wallie Dayton, one of the lowest leechers in this wide, wide world. And you know he is."

"No argument there."

Eldridge said coaxingly: "Come on, Sam, tell me things. Have you got a lead? Do you think either of these escaped guys from the asylum are responsible? Have you got any idea about who is, if they're not? Come on, give it. I'll give you a break in the sheet."

"No ideas yet," I said, "except that Wallie had better keep that big mouth of his buttoned up. He talks too much."

"He told me about some guy shooting at you, too."

"Going to publish it?"

Eldridge said: "Hell, no! He didn't hit you, did he? You guys aren't news . . . you haven't got a million dollars back of you like the two girls have. You guys are just nothing."

I looked up and saw the same State Police sergeant we'd seen in the undertaking parlor bearing down on us, and I agreed with Eldridge.

I said: "Here comes a gentleman who thinks the same thing, only worse. Be seeing you, Jimmy."

Jimmy drove off just as the sergeant came up.

THE sergeant was wrathy, and for the first time I noticed how big and tough the State picked its cops. From the way he looked and sounded

I might have personal knowledge of it at any moment, I thought.

"I'm getting tired of you guys," he said.

"Why?"

"You impersonated an officer, when you told the coroner you were police. You've been questioning the help around here, and you've got 'em in such a state I can't learn a thing. And you got the newspapers on the thing."

"Not me."

"Ain't your name Dayton?"

"It is not."

"Then you're the other one. One of the newspaper boys told me that Dayton called in and gave his editor the tip-off on this thing. For twenty-five bucks. . . . Dayton's to collect it when he goes back to town."

"Thanks, sergeant. That was news to me."

"Why thank me?"

"Now I'll know enough to get my cut."

"You keep out from under foot. I'm telling you, not asking you."

"We haven't bothered."

"You're not going to."

We had a right to be around, as long as we were hired by Miss Caswell, but a right like that isn't a thing to argue with a State policeman. So I let it go, and went up to the office tent. About half of the little girls were grouped around it, and then out came Mr. Barnes and sister Fay, along with Miss Caswell and William B. Smith.

There was no mistaking Barnes. He looked like a caricature of the successful business man. He was heavy but not fat. Just solid. He wasn't gray but his blond head was streaked with it. He had a gray,

gray mustache that looked like a worn section of scrub brush, and his face had a well-massaged look, though it was shot through with tiny veins.

Sister Fay was a dreamy looking wench who looked as though she might be addicted to Shelley and Keats. You could just tell that she doted on Chopin. A definite neurotic. . . .

But a good-looking wench, if you care for the vague emotional type.

I moved in close and Miss Caswell beckoned me and said: "And where is Mr. Dayton?"

"Boring from within," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"I can't very well tell you what I think it means. Probably Mr. Dayton would have a different explanation."

She sighed, and I knew by that that Wallie had already started something fluttering in the old gal's breast. She said: "I wish he were here. . . . I want him to meet Mr. Barnes. Mr. Barnes, this is Mr. Drake. The gentleman I spoke of, you remember."

Barnes held out a hand and said: "A pleasure, Mr. Drake, in spite of the circumstances."

AND then I heard a solid *thwack* and he went back on his heels so hard he almost jerked me off balance from still having hold of my hand. I heard the flat spanging noise of a rifle at least three hundred yards away . . . and I got my hand loose in a hurry and let the beefy State sergeant get in between me and the direction from which the rifle bullet had come.

Barnes had a startled, wondering

expression on his face, and one hand up to his left shoulder. Daughter Fay was standing there with her mouth open and looking more like a fallen angel by the second, and Miss Caswell didn't even know what had happened.

But the sergeant did. He bawled out: "Get over there, men. It came from in back of camp."

Barnes said: "I do believe I've been shot."

"I heard it hit," said the sergeant. "Look at him, Smith! Don't stand there like a dummy. You must know something about patching people up . . . you're an undertaker, ain't you?"

Smith said primly: "It's another matter, working on a corpse."

Then Miss Caswell got the thought and took over, although not with her usual domineering form. "I understand first aid," she said. "Please tell me where you're wounded, Mr. Barnes. Come into the office . . . I have a kit there in readiness."

That was all . . . until they took Barnes away in the ambulance. He had a neat little hole drilled through his shoulder. The rifleman had been using full metal patched slugs, too, because it was no bigger where the bullet emerged than where it entered. By the time he'd been taken away, Wallie was back, with the cat-plus-canary expression . . . and I saw him talking to Miss Caswell just before I got him away and started toward our camp with me.

And on the way he told me: "I got a date with the old witch tonight. At ten . . . I told her the moon would be simply beautiful from that time on."

"You mean to tell me she went for that chestnut?"

"And how," said Wallie. "She aided and abetted it. She told me that the girls went to bed at half-past nine, and that we'd have the moon all to ourselves. She even said that the Indians called the moon, the way it is now, the lovers' moon."

"I don't believe it."

Wallie said: "They're all the same. A few years don't make a bit of difference."

It looked like he was right.

CHAPTER VII

The Escaped Lunatics



ILLY THOMPSON, the riding master, was waiting for us at our camp. He was young, not over twenty-five and he had that look that people get when they've been around horses most of their lives. Lean and quiet-acting, and with a slow way of talking. He was sitting by Wallie's whiskey bottle, with a glass in his hand, and he didn't put it down when we walked up, but waved it in salute.

"Here's how, Sherlocks," he said.

"You got a nerve," Wallie snapped.

"Why? You'd have offered it to me if you'd have been here."

Wallie admitted: "I guess that's right."

"So I just took it. I came over for a little talk."

"Talk ahead," I said.

"Which one of you is the boss?"

"Both of us."

"Then I got something to say to both of you. And I got something to say to you personally, mister."

This last was to Wallie, who grinned and said: "Say it."

"It's keep away from my girl."

"Which one is she?"

"Marian Hedges. I saw you with her."

"Where?"

"Going down toward the lake."

"You didn't see us when we were walking along the shore?"

"No."

Wallie said, in a satisfied voice: "Then, buddy, you didn't see anything."

Thompson got to his feet and Wallie slid his left foot ahead and turned a little bit to the side, in case it came to trouble. It looked that way for a moment, too, because Thompson was mad enough to go ahead. And then I spoiled the chance of a fracas, by putting in my say.

"What else was it you wanted?" I asked.

"It's this. I hear you've been around asking questions about me behind my back. I won't have that . . . if you want to know anything, you come to me."

"Who told you all this?"

"Gould, the swimming instructor."

I said mildly: "Listen, little man. We've been asking questions about everybody. That's our business. I'd just as soon ask you as anybody else, if that means something."

"Then ask me . . . don't sneak around behind my back."

BY THAT time I'd decided I didn't like him. A private cop takes a lot of blame because of asking questions but that snooping around is the way he makes a living and he expects it. But this bird was too cocky, and I didn't like his type. He was too good-looking and you could see he knew it. He was the

romantic type that would pick a job in a girl's school because of gals and not the job . . . and that's a type I don't like.

I said: "Then I'll ask you. Did you ever have anything to do with Zoa Barnes?"

"Of course not. I was the only one that didn't."

"Why was that?"

He acted as if the question didn't make sense. "Look, mister," he said wearily. "You've asked enough questions to know that I played around last year with Fay Barnes. Now Zoa and Fay were sisters . . . does it seem likely I'd go for the sister, too?"

"Why not?" said Wallie, with interest.

"You can't do it. The sisters would compare notes. They'd cross you up. You could never possibly get across."

Wallie said, in an arguing way: "Now on that I don't agree. Not at all. I remember one time I was running around with two sisters and at the same time. I'd take Rosa out on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and I'd take her sister Maria out on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. That's before I got in this racket and I had my nights free. I alternated, and all it did was keep the girls jealous of each other. Each of them was trying to out-do the other one, and between 'em I had one hell of a time."

I said: "What did you do on Sunday nights? Rest?"

Wallie looked pained and said: "Not at all, Sam, not at all. That was during the time I was married to Sadie, and a man never rested with that woman in the house. I had

to stay home on Sundays to keep her contented."

I said: "Let it go. Then you never played around with Zoa Barnes, Thompson?"

"No."

"How well did you know Fay?"

"What's Fay got to do with Zoa being killed? She wasn't anywhere near here."

"That wasn't the question."

HE SAID sullenly: "It's none of your business and it's got nothing to do with the case, but I . . . I knew Fay pretty well."

"As well as you know Marian Hodges?" asked Wallie, brightly.

Thompson gave him a dirty look and said: "The same, if that's the answer you want."

"That's it," said Wallie. "A swell kid, if you ask me."

"Shoot a rifle much?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Where were you when Barnes was shot this afternoon?"

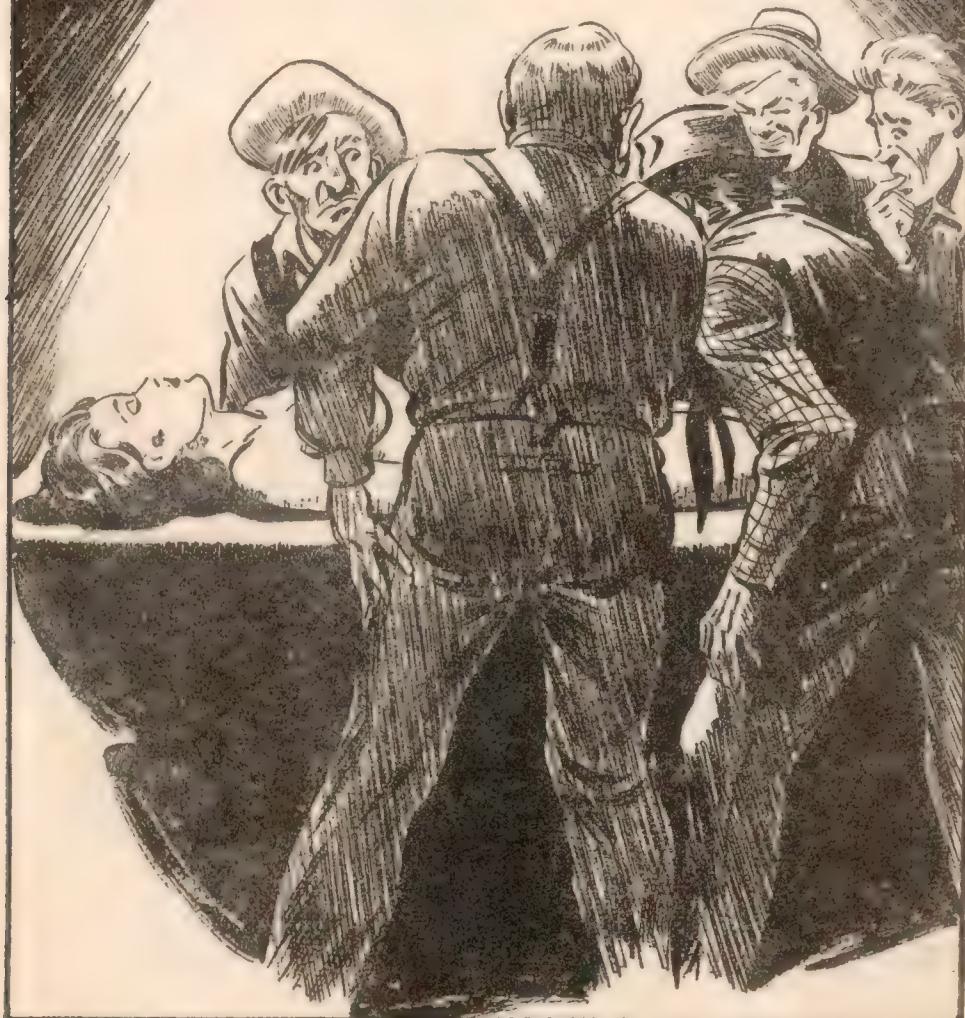
"At the stables. The State cops asked me that."

"You prove it to 'em?"

He said nastily: "Mister, I was there alone, doing my work. Gould was down at the bathhouses, also alone and also doing his work. Grogan was in the garage washing the station wagon. He was also alone and doing his work. If any of us had thought we would need an alibi, we'd have fixed one."

Wallie said: "The cops think it's the two guys that got loose from the Home for the Criminally Insane that did it. Both the guys were there for getting mixed up with young girls, and the cops think they broke into some farmhouse since they got

It seemed as if half the male population of Severn was there to see the body.



loose and picked up the rifle they used to shoot Barnes."

I said: "Wallic, you talk too much."

"It's what they think," he said.

"And they think the shot got Barnes by mistake . . . it was meant for you, Sam, but the guy missed and got Barnes instead. He was just at your right, and the guy probably pulled

the shot a little. And that's what Eldridge thinks, too, Sam."

"Eldridge left before it happened."

Wallie grinned and said: "The phone still works. As soon as I heard about it I phoned . . . we got some more money to split, baby. From his paper and from the others, too."

Thompson said he'd be going but he left without further remark from anybody.

I WAS too busy raising hell with Wallie about the phoning he'd done. It was making us a little money, all right, but it was blacking our eye with the State cops, and I didn't want that. And it was while we were bickering that Wallie found the second note.

This was on the side of a pasteboard carton and it had been printed in a smudgy charcoal way. *I missed but I won't miss the next. Barnes got in the way but your turn is coming. Get out.*

It was unsigned, like the one before.

We read it and I said: "This changes things again. I've got to go back to the camp."

"So do I," said Wallie. "And if you want to talk to the old dame, why, you make it before ten o'clock. Don't forget my date."

"I won't. And what did you mean by telling Eldridge that you were 'boring from within'? Was that a gag?"

"Maybe in part. But at that, Sam, I've got an idea."

"What?"

"It's nothing definite. But you can bet one thing. These two poor

crazy guys from the State home haven't got anything to do with this mess."

"I don't think that either."

"The State cops, do."

"I know it," I said. "But it's too pat. Things don't happen like that. It makes it too easy."

"It's never easy for murder," said Wallie.

We left then for the camp . . . and to hear something that made our idea of the two escaped men from the home being innocent not look so sound.

THE cops had caught one of them and had a line on the other. A bloody line, too. The one they'd caught was turned in by a farmer who'd seen him burrowing into a haystack as he drove by, and that one had given no trouble.

Not so with the second.

This one, a lad named Dombrowski, had broken into a farmhouse not over a mile from the camp, and he'd killed the owner and assaulted his wife.

She'd been taken to the hospital in a bad way . . . a fractured skull and internal injuries . . . and no one would have known who'd done it except that one of the men at our girl's camp had been driving by and had seen someone running into the woods from the farm lot and had stopped to investigate. He'd found the dead farmer just inside the kitchen door and his wife inside the bedroom, and he'd called in for the cops.

It was the tough State sergeant who was telling us all this.

I said: "How d'ya know it was this escaped lunatic?"

"This man that works here described him."

"What man . . . was it Billy Thompson?"

"Oh, no . . . Gould, the swimming teacher."

That was my moron friend, who'd given me the lowdown on Thompson.

"Why would you think it was Thompson?"

"No reason."

"And here's something for you to think about, Drake. You were telling about some guy taking shots at you and your partner, weren't you? And Mr. Barnes was shot with a rifle, wasn't he?"

"Sure."

"It would be the same gun, wouldn't it?"

"Likely."

"A 25-35?"

"That's the size shell we found out back."

"Well, this farmer was shot with a 25-35. We found the empty case just outside the kitchen door. Apparently the farmer opened the door and Dombrowski let him have it from where he was standing in the yard. And then he went in and went to work on the woman."

"Bad!"

"D'ya know anybody named Dombrowski?"

"Never even heard the name until now?"

"Does Dayton?"

"Not that I know of. You can ask him."

The sergeant gave me a meaning look and said: "I wouldn't think of bothering him now. I just saw him heading toward the lake, with some girl."

I WONDERED how anybody, even in all kindness, could call Miss Caswell a girl, and then looked at my watch. It was only half-past eight, an hour and more before his date with Miss Caswell, and I got the thought. Wallie was making a little hay while waiting for the lover's moon to come on in full power . . . sort of practising up for the heavy work to come later.

I said: "The —! The girl would be blond and pretty, wouldn't she?"

"That's right. A girl named Hodges . . . Marian Hodges. Why?"

"He's boring from within," I said. "You any idea where this Dombrowski got a 25-35 rifle?"

The sergeant gave me his best manhunting look and said: "And that's the thing that definitely ties him up to the killings here at this camp. That's the thing that definitely puts him here, on the scene of the crime. That gun was taken from right here, Drake. Right here is where Dombrowski picked it up."

"The hell you say."

"That's right. It's a gun that belongs to this fellow Gould . . . the one that found the farmer and his wife. It's been stolen from him . . . he told us about it after he heard the farmer had been killed with that calibre gun. He hadn't thought about this gun of his, but when he heard that, he looked to see if it was where it belonged and it was missing. Now what do you think of that?"

I thought plenty, but none of it meant a thing. Somehow, I couldn't imagine Gould as a killer, and certainly not a killer who'd go so far afield. The two girls, Zoa Barnes and the little Smedgley one, could

have been killed by some lunatic who'd been frightened away before any attack. That was possible. But I couldn't make killings like that jibe with the ones happening at a lonely farmhouse. And none of it explained why anybody should be shooting at Wallie and me.

That must have been bothering the sergeant, too, because he said: "I think maybe we'll find that Dombrowski is a nut who likes to shoot to see people jump. Something like that. He probably thinks you and Dayton are keepers, looking for him. You both look like cops, you know."

I said: "Tell Dayton that, will you?"

"Why?"

"He thinks he looks like a Greek God," I said. "And there never was a cop in the world that didn't look like a half-wit."

"Hey! I'm a cop."

I said: "You sure call your shots, brother."

I wouldn't have ribbed him but I was upset. I had ideas, and this escaped maniac Dombrowski, was making 'em look like they didn't amount to much. At that, I wouldn't give 'em up.

CHAPTER VII

Competition for Wallie



FOUND Wallie on the shore of the lake and making violent love to the blond Miss Hodges. She broke loose from him as I came up and stood there blushing furiously, though Wallie was unabashed.

"Hi, Sam!" he said. "I want you to know Miss Hodges, the sweetest

thing this side of that institution popular with the other angels. I mean Heaven. Marian, this is Sam Drake."

I said: "Wallie, I want you. Glad to meet you, Miss Hodges."

Miss Hodges fluttered her hands and said: "Oh, I don't know what you'll think, Mr. Drake, about Wallie and me. And I so wanted to make a good impression on you."

I thought of what I'd seen when I'd walked up. I said: "Honey, you have. You certainly have."

She blushed all the redder. "Oh, not that way! I mean . . . I mean I don't want you to think I'm just awful."

"I don't."

"It means so much to me . . . what with the camp closing soon for the summer and all."

"I don't get it."

"Why, I mean. . . ."

Wallie broke in fast. "I think you'd better let me pave the way for it, sweetheart," he said. "Better let me fix it up a little, first."

Sweetheart looked puzzled and stammered, finally, that she'd better be getting on back to camp. She left, and Wallie started in on me.

"You big clown," he snarled. "You would have to walk in on me at the critical moment. I ought to smack your face in."

"Why don't you?"

"You're too damn' big."

"What was she talking about?"

"I was giving her a line," said Wallie. "I was telling her you would be needing an office girl about the time this she-bang closed up, and she was falling for it. Then you got to come along and kick the whole deal over."



It was the colored girl who found him, and she was really in a state.

"You were giving her a job in my office, that it?"

"Well, sure."

"And you were getting the gratitude?"

He grinned and said: "You came up too soon to find out."

I said: "If I give her a job in my office, dope, you can guess who she'll be thanking. I've got a job for you."

"I've got a date with Miss Caswell."

"You've got work to do that's more important."

HE DID everything but break down and cry but he left for Severn in the car.

And I went back to the camp and to the office tent and Miss Caswell. It took a little time to get her to do it without telling her the reason why, but after a while she sent one of the kitchen help for Gould, the swimming instructor. The old gal was watching the clock like a hawk does a chicken . . . and I could see that the thought of her ten o'clock date with Wallie was lying heavy on her mind.

I didn't have the heart to tell her he wouldn't keep it . . . that duty had called him to a more arid field.

IT WAS almost ten before they found that Gould was missing and it was after eleven before they found him down by his bathhouses. Somebody had hit him over the head with one of the oars from the boathouse at the side and not once but many times. His head had been methodically beaten in, and from the warmth of the body and from seeing the blood still oozing out from his fractured skull, I knew it hadn't been

done more than a few minutes before.

It had been the colored girl that worked in the kitchen who'd found him . . . and she was in a state. She'd paled to a dirty gray and her eyes were rolling like they were independent things.

"Yassuh!" she said. "Mista Gould, he was right like this. Yassuh. I pret' near step on him 'fore I see him, an', mista, you hear me yell."

We'd heard her find him, all right. Miss Caswell was in the middle of telling me how mine must be a hardening profession and that it was a shame a gentleman like Mr. Dayton should be obliged to combat it. That a finer type of work should be found for him . . . that he should be associated with a higher class of people than a detective would meet in his usual work.

I was agreeing with her when we heard the colored wench yowl and we both ran down to the lake. I stood up from looking Gould over, and then the mentor supposed to be taking telephone calls came down to us.

"It's for you, Mr. Drake," she said. "It's Mr. Dayton."

"What's he want?"

"He didn't say . . . he seemed excited."

I had to go up to the phone to call the State cops and tell 'em about the new murder, or I'd have let Wallie and his excitement go. I couldn't see how the killer could be in two places at once . . . and he'd just been there by the lake. He couldn't well be where Wallie was . . . or so I thought at the time.

I said: "Yeah, Wallie, it's me. Sam."

"It's Barnes, Sam," he stuttered.

"You were right. He almost got him."

"What the hell! He couldn't have."

"He did, though."

"Listen," I said, talking slow and trying to make it sound like sense to myself. "Listen! He just killed Gould, right here by the lake. Not over fifteen minutes ago. He couldn't have been in Severn and after Barnes . . . he must've been here."

WALLIE sounded apologetic. "Well, look, Sam, it was like this. It maybe happened an hour ago, or maybe an hour and a half ago. I just stepped out for a minute, and it happened while I was gone."

"Who with?"

"With the daughter, Sam. Fay. It was in the line of business, Sam. You can believe me."

"Like hell!"

"I thought she might give me some of the low down on her sister . . . that maybe she could give me some reason why the kid was killed. You know."

"I know," I said. "Just like always. You're out chasing some girl, when you're supposed to be on the job."

"I didn't get to first base, either," said Wallie, agreeing with my reason. "She looks like she ought to be hotter than a pistol but I couldn't do a thing. It's one of the heart-belts-to-daddy things, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask. What I'm trying to do is find out about Barnes."

"He's all right. It's like I said, it happened about two hours ago. He was in bed, with his bad shoulder,

and the nurse was out of the room for a minute. She's a horse-faced wench, Sam, and homely as hell, so she wasn't meeting any boy friend or nothing. Out of the room on some nursing business, I guess. Well, the killer came up the fire-escape, it goes right by Barnes' windows, and the first thing Barnes knew he looked up and saw him. He was against the light and all Barnes could see was a shadow, though he claims the guy was wearing a mask. The window was open a little bit and the guy started to shove it up and crawl in, and Barnes saw the knife in his hand. Then he yelled and the nurse and an orderly came running and the guy crawled back out the window and down the fire-escape and ran off. The cops looked for him but they didn't find him."

"He came back here and killed Gould, the swimming teacher," I said.

"The sergeant here claims up and down it was Dombrowski. He says he thinks Dombrowski shot all the shells that was in the 25-35 he stole, and that he's going to use a knife from now on. He's called in for reinforcements."

"He may need 'em to pick up this lunatic of a Dombrowski, but he don't need 'em to get the man who was after Barnes. Now, Wallie, listen! Stay there with Barnes. Leave the women alone . . . stay there with Barnes no matter what you do."

"All right," said Wallie, in a disgusted voice. "But I warn you, Sam, this nurse will drive me crazy, just looking at her. How's my old babe? . . . is she worrying because I didn't keep the date?"

"She was, but she's got other

things on her mind right now."

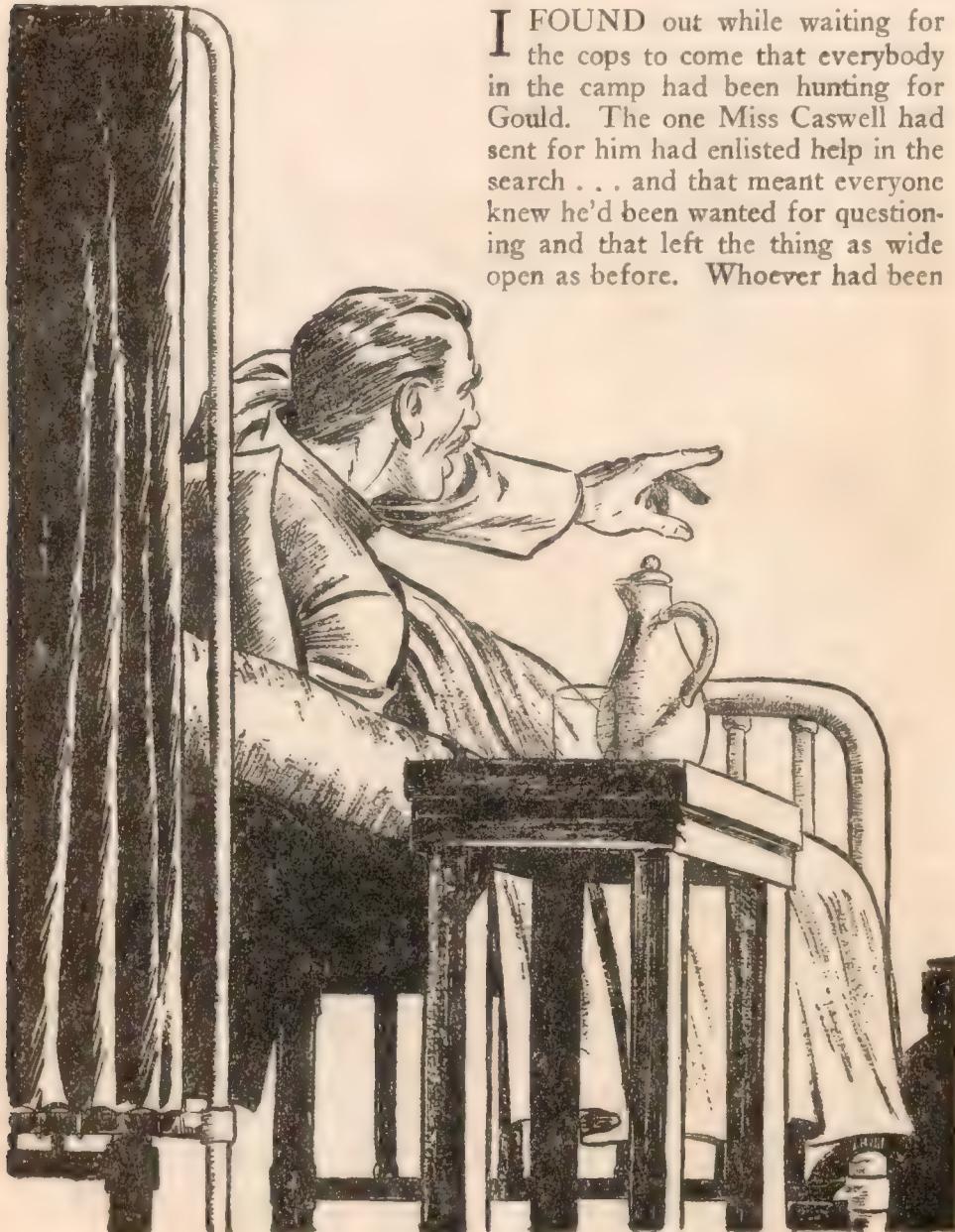
He said cheerfully: "I'll get her back on the right track when I see her. Okay, Sam."

"With that he hung up, and I decided that if I ever worked with him

on another case, it would be one somewhere where there wasn't a woman in miles.

He certainly wasn't worth a damn to me or anybody else if there was a girl within reaching distance.

I FOUND out while waiting for the cops to come that everybody in the camp had been hunting for Gould. The one Miss Caswell had sent for him had enlisted help in the search . . . and that meant everyone knew he'd been wanted for questioning and that left the thing as wide open as before. Whoever had been



afraid of what Gould might have told had known he was going to have a chance to tell it and had killed him before he had a chance to talk.

And, as usual, nobody had an alibi.

I wandered out of the tent after finding this out and ran fair and

The guy crawled back out the window before anybody could stop him.



square into Marian Hodges. She moved into me so close I had to take a step back to keep from being bumped, and then she rolled her big blue eyes up at me and turned on all the charm.

"Did Wallie . . . Mr. Dayton . . . talk to you about poor little me?"

"He did."

"Oh! Then you will give me a job. Oh, Mr. Drake, I thank you and thank you, and honest, Mr. Drake, I really know how to work in an office. And I've just got to have a job in the city, when the camp closes."

"Why?"

"Well, because."

I didn't think the cops would be there for a little while yet and I wanted to get my mind away from murder. First there'd been the Barnes girl and then the little Smedgley kid. That last had hurt, because I'd talked to the little girl and she'd been as nice as she could be. She was only a kid, and somehow that makes a thing like that stand out more, too. Then there'd been the farmer and his wife, only I couldn't help but think that was something not connected with the trouble in the camp. I didn't know . . . they'd been city people before they'd moved to the farm . . . and that left a possible tie-up with the killer open, but I couldn't see just why anybody would go as far as murder with them for any logical reason.

But then, murder's never logical and I knew that. There was always the chance of that lunatic of a Dombrowski being responsible for that pair of deaths.

Gould being killed and an attempt at Barnes' life put a cap on the

thing. Gould, if I was right, had been just a big soft kid who was more than open to suggestion . . . and he'd been killed when the murderer thought he'd served his part. Trying to kill Barnes tied in with what had gone before . . . it was the only thing possible under the circumstances, as a wait wasn't indicated.

The murderer couldn't very well wait for another opportunity, not with a natural patsy like this man Dombrowski running around loose to take the blame. It isn't often a killer would have an out like that . . . a girl dead and an escaped maniac loose on the countryside.

It had meant the killer would take action then, before Dombrowski was recaptured, and I'd been right in figuring it that way.

All in all I welcomed a little relaxation and here it was all ready to hand and asking for favors.

WE STROLLED down toward the lake and stopped in a shadowy patch beyond the boathouse and away from where Gould had died.

I said: "Tell me about this. *Why* do you have to go to the city when the camp closes? Don't tell me it's because you want to be near Wallie; you'd have to fight to him through a crowd, once he gets back where he's already put in some licks. He's got more women back there than you can shake a stick at."

"It isn't Wallie," she said, snuggling up closer. "I like you better than I do him. All he thinks about is . . . well, I don't like to be silly . . . he all the time tries to get, well, not exactly fresh, but friendly, if you know what I mean."

If Wallie wasn't fresh, I wondered what this blond wonder's version of fresh would be, but I didn't say anything. If she didn't think Wallie was fresh, she'd think a gale was a gentle breeze.

I said: "I'm not hard to get along with. There's a time and place for all things, is the way I figure it."

She got even closer, if that were possible, and sighed: "That's what I mean. Isn't the moon beautiful tonight, Sam. You don't mind if I call you Sam, do you? I feel like we've known each other for just ages . . . like we'd been more than just casual acquaintances . . . like we'd been really important to each other."

I could see where Wallie and his fast tactics and this babe, with hers, had got along like ham and beans. She was working too fast for me and I thought I'd been around.

AND so I said: "Look, honey! You can tell it to me. It won't make any difference between you and me. . . . I know I'm not the only man in the world."

"You are right now, to me," she said, with common sense. "I wish Billy was like that. I think a girl's got a right to have fun with other men, too, but he don't."

"Billy?"

"Why, yes, Billy Thompson. We're sort of engaged, but my goodness, that don't mean we're married yet. I wouldn't do anything like this, once I was married, but he don't want me to have any fun at all before, even."

"It's that serious with you, eh? Marriage and the rest of it."

"Why, yes. Of course I know Billy has gone with a lot of girls and

I've gone with some men and all that, but once we're married, that all will stop. I don't care what he does before we're married, and I don't see why he should care what I do."

I said: "Look, honey! He's after the Barnes girl. Fay Barnes. He gave her a play last year and he's never stopped. He's serious with her . . . not with you."

She slapped my face once before I could catch her hands. Then she turned and ran, while trying to straighten her dress as she did, and I turned and went back to the office tent.

I could see the lights of a police car coming for one thing, and for another I figured I'd started a little fire that might turn into a real blaze.

It was worth a chance, at any rate.

CHAPTER IX

The Punch



ILLIAM B. SMITH was with the State Police sergeant but he didn't go into raptures about the beautiful body he had to work with, again. He was the type that thought the body beautiful was definitely a feminine thing, and it was in all his talk and actions. But he did give it the professional slant.

"Going to take a lot of wax and a lot of patching, to get that head looking right," he said, staring down at what was left of Gould. "He's broken up right bad. A messy job, and I don't suppose there'll be money enough to even give him a decent burial."

"An expensive one, you mean," I said, getting sore. "This one ought

to be on the house. You've got two jobs from here now—besides the farmer and his wife that might tie in to this."

"You wouldn't understand," he said loftily. "A workman is entitled to the fruits of his labor. An artist is entitled to even more . . . he puts love and respect into his work."

"Sing small to me, mister," I said. We were away from the sergeant, all by ourselves. "You crack fresh to me, mister, and I'll start making an investigation into your relations with the dead Barnes girl. That's what, and I'll carry it on farther and see how many other girls you know in this camp. I'm wise to what's been going on."

He said earnestly: "Mister Drake, I wasn't at the Brierhoff's place more than once or twice. Well, let's say half a dozen times at best."

I didn't get it for a moment. . . . I knew I'd heard the name but I couldn't think where. And then I remembered . . . the State sergeant had told me Brierhoff was the name of the farmer and his wife who'd just been killed.

"Ever see anybody from the camp over there?"

"Well . . . ugh . . . just the girls, you know. Brierhoff and his wife were very careful . . . they always kept the parties separate. That's why the girls liked it . . . it appealed to their sense of the romantic, you see."

I SAID I understood . . . and I was telling the truth for once. It gave a reason for the Brierhoff killings . . . and that's what was needed. I left William B. Smith standing there and went up to the office tent and to the phone, and then I got the

Severn Hospital and finally Wallie.

"Have you misplaced that Fay?" I asked "Did you let her go, when you found out she wouldn't play?"

"We're sitting in the hall, just outside her old man's room," he said. "It was that or nothing, Sam. I took another look at that horse-faced nurse and I could see I couldn't go for that, even if I turned the hall lights out, so I got Fay again. At least I can try, can't I? And at that I think she's softening up."

"You keep boring from within, there," I said. "Stay close to the old man, but stay close to Fay, too. It's the pay-off, I think, and I don't want her talking to anybody from the camp."

"I understand," he said, and then he laughed. "If she'll soften a little bit more, Sam, I can safely class it as a labor of love."

I asked: "What about Miss Caswell? You forgetting her?"

He laughed again and told me: "That's a loose end, but I can pick that up as I go along. She'll wait . . . she's been waiting all her life."

I thought he had something there at that . . . but it was nothing I was interested in.

GROGAN came out before the girl got there and the State sergeant picked him up after he'd gone past earshot of the tent. The sergeant had adopted a I-don't-believe-a-word-of-it attitude and kept insisting his Dombrowski maniac was the one who was guilty, but he was playing along and that's all I wanted.

Grogan looked truculent and said: "Yeah, so I was leaving the tent. What about it?"

"That's what we want to know,"



She slapped my face just once before I could catch her hands.

the sergeant said in a hard voice.

"Can't a man take a walk for an hour or so?"

"Why walk at an hour like this? You meeting somebody?"

"That's my business."

The sergeant was inclined to be one of the important acting boys, anyway, and this got under his skin.

"And my business, too, buddy," he snapped. "There's been five people killed around this place, so far, and I want to see there's no more of it. If I ask you questions, you'd better answer me and answer me right. Come out with it . . . what's the reason for the walk?"

Grogan was young and flip but this show of authority was too much for him. He said, in a sullen way:

"I do it when Billy's got a girl coming to see him and he does the

same for me. The girls sneak out of their tents and come to ours, and one of us always gets out and gives the other one a break."

I nodded at the sergeant and said: "See what I told you? It's working out. I built a fire under that little wench and she's going to try and put it out."

"Thompson's got a girl coming, then? That it?"

"That's it," said Grogan.

"Which one?"

"I don't know. He gives 'em all a play."

"Would it be Marian Hodges?" I asked.

"It could be. She's been one of them that comes the most."

The sergeant said to Grogan: "You keep on going, buddy. Don't come back for a couple of hours."

Keep out of the way. I don't want you under foot."

"Yes, sir," said Grogan.

"Don't run away . . . the State'll want you on the witness stand. Just stay away until this mess is cleared . . . two hours, I say."

He left, and I said to the sergeant: "It might take longer than that."

He sneered at me and said: "You don't know a thing, mister, about jealous women. I do. . . . I'm married to one. She'll crack into him about that inside of the first five minutes and they'll be going it hot and heavy in another five. You watch and see."

I said that was what I was hanging around the bushes for.

NEXT was Marian Hodges and she came up the path to the darkened tent with her head high and her little feet just stamping down. Even in that half light we could tell she was boiling mad. She threw the tent flap wide, and the sergeant and I could hear, from where we were hidden in the brush beside the tent, Thompson welcome her.

"Hello, my sweet," said he. "It's been so long since I held you in my arms. It's been like a lifetime."

The sergeant nudged me and whispered: "Believe it or not, I used to talk to *my* old lady like that. Before we was married, though, it was."

"It's a line that's used," I agreed.

Marian Hodges said clearly: "Don't sweetheart me, you cheap heel! I'm your sweetheart, am I? Then what the hell is the Barnes girl? Tell me that."

"Now, honey."

She started to work on him then.

I knew she had a temper from the way she'd slapped my face when I talked about Thompson to her, but I didn't dream it was anything like that. She called him up and down. She told him everything he'd done that was wrong and there were plenty. She told him everything he hadn't done right and that included a list and no mistake. It seemed he'd lied to her and broken her heart and all that, but what was far worse, he was quitting her for a drab little—that wasn't fit to shine her, Marian Hodges', shoes. And her finish was a classic.

"All she's got is a body and money, and she's free with both," she said.

Thompson gave her the only logical answer, which proved she'd got under his skin.

"And all you've got is the body," he said, "and you're free with that, both with me and with everybody else. Who are you to talk to me about cheating? If you'd keep your mouth shut, and keep out of my business, it would work out all right. I'll see you when we're both in town."

"You're planning on marrying that girl."

"Well, maybe," he admitted. "But that won't keep us from seeing each other, will it?"

"You were going to marry me."

"Look, honey," he said. "Trust me, that's all I ask you to do. Just trust me. Just think. Fay will have all that money. If I marry her it doesn't mean I really love her, like I love you. It's just insuring our future. It would be like I was marrying Miss Caswell. Just a way of getting money, that's all."

"So you've been making a play for Miss Caswell, too?"

"Oh, no, sweets! Oh, no! But every time we're alone she hints and hems and haws about how lonesome she is and how life's greatest experience has been denied her, and I've got to pretend I don't know what she means. I could marry her, but Fay Barnes will have more money."

The sergeant nudged me again and whispered: "Can you tie that? That old bat of a Caswell woman, making that kind of a break?"

I said: "Wallie was right. He claims they're never too old."

"She's too old for me to consider," said the sergeant. "Maybe it's like a man eating raw oysters. You get that first one down and the rest come easy. Maybe it'd be like that . . . make love to her once and after that you wouldn't care what happened."

"Maybe," I said. "Heard enough?"

He nodded and said: "Sure."

And then we started to make the pinch.

CHAPTER X

The Brierhoff Farm

 THE sergeant was ahead . . . he was the arresting officer, of course, and he threw open the tent flap and then laughed. The main quarrel had been over, or at least had died down, and I supposed the blond and Thompson were making up after the quarrel. Then, very much the gentleman, he backed out and called through the canvas to Thompson.

"Get yourself together, mister, and come on out. You too, sister.



Even in the half light
it was easy to see
she was boiling mad.

Get ready in a hurry, too, Thompson . . . you're under arrest."

"For what?" called Thompson.

"Suspicion of murder," said the sergeant.

Then there was silence for a second and then a frantic whispering from inside. The sergeant gave 'em a moment and then bawled out again.

"Hurry up!"

I thought I heard cloth rustle against canvas and got around past the side of the tent where I could see the back . . . and I was in time to see a figure fading into the woods. I had my gun lined on it and a cinch shot, but as I took up the trigger slack I thought of it maybe being the girl.

I shouted: "Stop! Stop, I tell you."

The sergeant went in the tent then, and I heard him bellow: "Where is he? Where'd he go, I say?"

I didn't hear the girl answer, because I was running after Thompson, who had a fifty-foot lead on me. And he kept it until we'd passed the office tent and were running toward where the road turned into the camp from the main highway. He was possibly fifty feet, certainly not much more than that, in front of me, and I was planning on closing the gap and then shooting him through a leg, when another State trooper showed up in front of him.

"Hey," said the trooper.

I shouted something but nobody heard it. The shooting started when the trooper showed in sight.

Thompson got in the first two and I got in the third. Thompson got in another, this time at me

instead of the trooper, and then the trooper put in the clincher. He fired and Thompson spun around once and fell with his hands out in front of him.

I said: "You killed him, damn it!"

The trooper said: "I shot him in the ham. I aimed there, anyway."

We went up, taking care that Thompson didn't reach the pistol he'd dropped . . . and the trooper was right. His heavy police slug had taken Thompson through the thigh and splintered the big bone there, and the shock had knocked him down and out as if he was a goner for sure.

I heard the sergeant running up and I thought I'd find out why the trooper had so providentially been in the right spot at that right time.

"What the hell were you doing out here?" I asked.

He was excited, stopping an escaping murderer the way he had, and he blurted out the truth.

"I was with a girl," he said. "What the hell's a man supposed to be around this camp anyway? A monk?"

I admitted a monk would have a hard time keeping monkish, or whatever monks were supposed to be, in that particular camp.

WE RODE the ambulance in with Thompson and we found Wallie where he was supposed to be, just for a change. A hospital corridor was a handicap, possibly, but nothing he couldn't take in his stride when he was with a girl. He bounced Fay Barnes out of his lap as we got out of the elevator, and came to meet us, letting her stand there alone.

"What gives?" he asked.

He had lipstick all over his face and neck and, from that and the silly grin he was wearing, I decided that Fay Barnes had softened up, as he thought she might.

I said: "We got Thompson and he's cracked. It's the way I figured it."

"Good work," said he. "I got the slant, when you told me to keep her handy. He's the guy, all right. They've been secretly engaged since last year. She thinks he made the world . . . or she did until she got smart to herself."

Thompson went by us, wheeled by on an operating table.

Wallie nodded at him and said: "Hurt bad?"

"Bad leg. I don't get that crack about the Barnes girl getting smart to herself."

Wallie said smugly: "Look, Sam, you know that after they've been out with me, they go home and throw rocks at their sweeties. Need I say more?"

I said he didn't and went on past him to where Fay Barnes was standing just outside her father's door. I said: "Miss Barnes, there's just one thing I'd like to ask. Did you meet Billy Thompson at the Brierhoff farm? Have you been meeting him there?"

She said: "Why, yes! Naturally I couldn't meet him at the camp, where my sister would hear about it and tell dad. Dad made me promise I wouldn't see him, you see."

"You know about us getting him?"

"Wallie told me," she said, her eyes going soft and doe-like. "I don't think it was fair, leaving Wallie here in all that danger. Sup-

pose that Billy had come back here and tried to kill dad, again? Wallie would have been all alone and Billy might have had a gun, or something."

"He did. He tried to kill a trooper and he tried to kill me."

"You see. He might have killed Wallie. There should have been somebody else on guard, *with* Wallie."

I said: "That Wallie Dayton will get along where a good man would starve."

"He was really in danger tonight, Mr. Drake," said she.

I thought of the ten o'clock date with Miss Caswell I'd saved him from and agreed with her.

THE post-mortem came in Barnes hospital room and we had the small fry out. That, of course, included Fay Barnes and Marian Hodges; both being barred on the grounds that the facts would be too hard a thing for them to face.

It was primer stuff for both of them, though of course Barnes didn't know that.

Barnes moved impatiently on the bed and winced when it bothered his wounded shoulder.

"I knew that young man was no good in the first place," he said. "That's why I ordered Fay to absolutely leave him alone. That's why I didn't allow her to return to camp with Zoa, this year. I thought I had her away from him, but I was in error . . . she'd take visits and come to Severn here and meet him at that Brierhoff farm."

"That was the Brierhoff's real business," said the State sergeant. "Drake discovered that. They were

using it as a meeting place for the girls from the camp and their sweethearts . . . they'd serve dinner and drinks and the girls fell for it because of the clandestine flair it gave their romance. That's why Thompson killed the Brierhoffs . . . he knew they could tie him up with your daughter Fay, Mr. Barnes. He'd started his killing . . . your daughter Zoa was already dead and Fay was your sole heir. With you out of the way, all he had to do was marry Fay and have his hands on your money."

"He must have been mad," said Barnes.

"Not so," I said. "He had a patsy . . . here were two men escaped from the Home for the Criminally Insane only five miles away. Zoa's murder would naturally be blamed on them."

"We got Dombrowski this morning," said the sergeant, with satisfaction. "The guy had got himself a job on a road gang, twenty-five miles from here. He hadn't done a thing . . . they may turn him loose as cured, pretty soon, I've found."

"Why did Gould, the swimming teacher, report him as being the one he saw running away from the Brierhoff farm?" asked Miss Caswell, who was sitting there and staring at Wallie as though he was the answer to that particular maiden's prayer. "I don't understand that."

I said: "That was easy, when you knew Gould. Gould was damned near simple. All Thompson did was give him a vague description and Gould thought that was what he saw. When we started to call Gould up for questioning, Miss Caswell, Thompson heard about it and knew that Gould would tell us that. So he

killed him before he could talk. That was right after he'd returned from town after trying to kill Mr. Barnes again. He'd swiped Gould's gun and used it, when he wrote us a note, trying to get us away. He didn't want us to work on the thing, in the first place. When he shot Mr. Barnes, he realized that if he could make us think he'd been trying to shoot me, instead of Mr. Barnes, it would cloud the issue. He took advantage of it and wrote another note. We just happened to walk in on him while he was writing it, and he stalled us by pretending to be sore about us asking questions about him. It was pretty weak, but it stood up for awhile."

"He told us all about it," said the sergeant. "He didn't seem to care much, anyway. . . . I think he's going to try and take an insanity plea, the way he's going. It's an act, or he'd show more remorse for killing the little Smedgley girl. She just happened to walk in on a meeting he had with your daughter Fay, Mr. Barnes. Of course she knew Fay wasn't supposed to be here . . . that's common gossip; a love affair like that was in a place like this, and the little girl might have spoken about it to somebody. The little girl was smart . . . she associated that with Zoa being killed . . . and called it a secret. Thompson killed her to keep her quiet . . . he'd killed one girl already . . . they couldn't hang him any higher for another death."

NOBODY said anything. Barnes, naturally, was all broken up over his daughter Zoa's death, and the rest of us were bothered even more by the little Smedgley girl hav-

ing been killed like that. And then Barnes broke it up with the business-like touch I like.

"I understand, gentlemen," he said, to Wallie and me, "that you were retained in this matter by Miss Caswell. I will pay your bill, if you'll send it to my Chicago office. Miss Caswell can give you the address."

I said that would be fine and he and Miss Caswell argued about who should pay it and why. Barnes lost . . . it ended with his proposition to pay accepted. Then the nurse hustled in and told us all that Mr. Barnes should have rest, and shooed us out.

And there Miss Caswell made her play.

"We had an engagement last evening," she said. "Do you remember, Mr. Dayton?"

Fay Barnes and Marian Hodges were standing together down at the end of the corridor, and Wallie was looking that way. He tore his glance away, with an effort.

"Ugh, yes," said he. "I . . . ugh . . . I was busy."

And so help me he blushed.

"Possibly tonight then," said Miss Caswell, suggestively.

Wallie said: "Ah, yes, possibly," and I could almost see the thoughts whirling through his mind.

He was really on a spot and didn't know which way to jump. On one hand he had the young Barnes filly. She was young and pretty and full of

original devilment . . . and also the type that might drop him the second she got a bit fed up with him. She had a father with lots of money . . . but that was something hard to figure too. Daddy might not pay off a son-in-law, and that's what Wallie would have to be to get a dime.

There it was. Youth and beauty and possibly money. And of course, marriage along with it.

On the other hand he had Miss Caswell. Fifty if a day and homely as she could be. But with her own money, even if it wasn't as much as was in the Barnes family coffers. And once he had her, he'd have her solid.

I could see him thinking it over and I could darn near hear his brain click over the angles as he came to them.

And then came his decision.

He turned to Miss Caswell, shrugging away from the two girls at the end of the hall, and he gave Miss Caswell his most beaming smile.

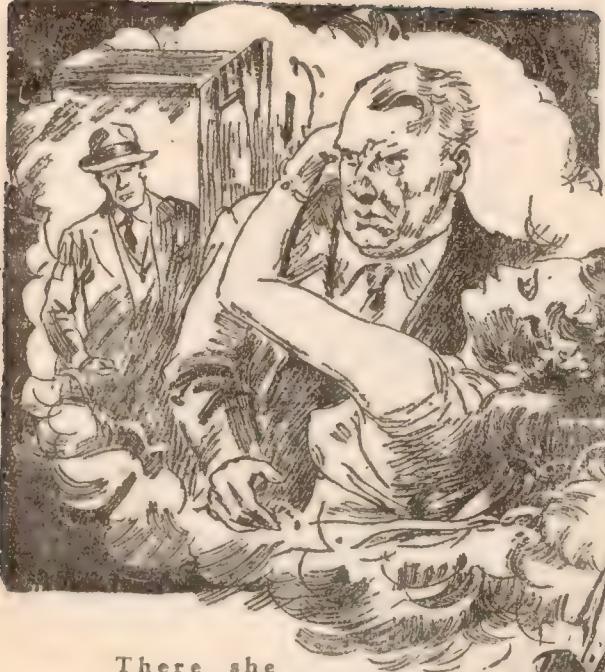
"Tonight. Tonight, at ten," he breathed softly.

And with the silliest grin I ever saw in my life on his face.

I said: "Good-by for now," and headed down the hall. I wanted to talk to Marian Hodges and see if she still wanted a job in my office.

I thought that if she did I might have a ten o'clock date for my own score.

Every post office, as well as banks and savings and loan associations, sells U. S. defense bonds. Buy them regularly and help win the war.



By
**ROBERT
LESLIE
BELLEM**

There she
stood, trying to
buy her life with the
only price she had to pay.



CARLIE HORNIGLE was loitering in the darkness of an alley's mouth across the street when the two homicide detectives brought me out of police headquarters. Rain slanted through the night to splash in the flowing gutters and wet asphalt made a shiny black mirror reflecting the twin green lights that marked the precinct station entrance.

I saw Charlie make a cup of his two hands for the match flame he lifted to his cigarette, and my blood pounded a little faster in my veins as I caught the signal. Charlie's face looked almost scared in the brief flare, his cheek-muscles drawn, his studious eyes worried behind the thick lenses he wore. Helping an accused murderer to escape from custody was a pretty big undertaking



CORPSE CROSS

There was the man who would stand by his friend, and there was the woman who demonstrated her particular brand of loyalty—and Rex thought, then, that he had learned what friendship was. . . . But there was still another lesson in store for him



for a law abiding citizen like Charlie Hornigle. But he intended to go through with it. His lighted match told me that.

We had arranged all the details when he visited me an hour or so ago in my cell. Now he was watching, waiting for me to make the first move. I could guess how upset it made him to see me with a pair of plainclothes guardians instead of just one. There was no way to reassure him, though, and I didn't try.

I was handcuffed to Detective Lieutenant Shawn, the toughest man on the force—so I had been told. Shawn was bulky, slow moving, inexorable as death itself as he pulled me down the steps to the sidewalk. I had thought him incapable of smiling, but he smiled now when his partner asked him:

"How about it, lieutenant? Think you can take this guy over to the D. A.'s office without help?"

"I think I can," Shawn said quietly. The words weren't sarcastic, just positive.

The other homicide man turned, bowed his head to the rain and trudged down the street, vanished around the next corner. Shawn tugged at the link of cold steel chain

that fastened my handcuff to his.
"Let's go, Randolph."

THERE was a departmental sedan at the curb, the only car in sight. I pulled back, my throat tight, my mouth as dry as a squeezed sponge. *This is it, I told myself.*

"Wait, my shoe lace has come undone," I lied. I leaned over as if to fix it with my free hand, jockeying myself into a crouch in front of Shawn.

Charlie Hornigle angled across the street. "Have you the right time, mister?" his voice sounded squeaky, frightened.

"Yeah," Shawn said. He raised his left arm to look at his wrist-watch, only that was the wrist to which I was manacled. When he lifted the hand I pulled downward on it, throwing him slightly off balance. And then I straightened up with all the strength I could muster, butting him under the chin with the top of my head.

His teeth clicked sharply together, cutting off the sigh that came from his lips like steam escaping. I had to step lively to keep from being pulled down on top of him as he fell.

Charlie Hornigle said: "Nice going, Rex. He's out for the count. Where's he keep his keys? For God's sake we've got to hurry before somebody—"

"Lower left vest pocket."

Charlie burrowed, came up with the keys and found the one that unlocked my handcuff. It felt good not to have that cold metal encircling my wrist. I beat my two fists together and drank the air of freedom deep in my lungs. The rain was like wine.

"My coupe's on the next street over," Charlie panted as if from some terrific physical exertion. "At the end of the alley." And he started to run.

I followed him. We raced through the alley, its darkness a tunnel of fear, the far end opening into Wyatt Avenue. We flung ourselves into Charlie's car, Charlie at the wheel, and the rear tires hissed on wet macadam as they gathered speed.

That was how easy it was.

I looked at Charlie's strained expression and knew it had not been easy on him. He said in his fearsqueaky voice: "This makes me an accessory, Rex. If that detective ever recognizes me—"

"He won't. Why should he? You had your coat collar up, your hat brim down. And it was dark. You're safe enough. Not that I don't appreciate the chance you took."

"I know you do, Rex. Forget it. The question is, what next?"

"Pull up," I said. "I'll get out here." We were on Burnham Boulevard by this time, the apartment district.

"But Rex, you can't just wander off in the rain! We've got to find a place to hide you until—"

I gave him a friendly dig in the ribs. "Quit worrying about me. I'll make out. You've done your bit. Now thanks and so long." I hopped out of the coupe, waved him off and watched the red blink of his tail light dwindling in the distance.

A BLOCK back there was an unobtrusive green Neon sign: *Flintridge Arms Apartments*. The building was six stories tall, a sedate brick structure for the salaried class.

I made for it, walking, measuring my pace when I wanted to run. My escape from Shawn must have been discovered by this time, my name and description broadcast on the police short wave. Every prowler crew in the city would be on the lookout for me—and you can't argue with officers who have a duty to perform. Already there were headlights booming a bright arc through the storm at the far intersection, turning toward me. . . .

I ducked into the Flintridge Arms, and the small lobby was empty. There were rows of brass mail boxes set flush into a marble wall, the names of the tenants written on cardboard inserts behind glass slots, each box provided with a push button and speaking tube. I found the name I wanted and pressed the corresponding buzzer.

Presently a voice came down through the tube, soft, modulated. "Who is it?"

"Rex Randolph," I called back, my mouth close to the round brass orifice. "May I come up?"

There was the suggestion of a gasp at the other end, an indrawn breath swiftly muffled. "Y-yes." Then I heard an electrical click unlocking the lobby's inner door.

I opened it, went to the automatic elevator and pressed the control that sent the cage whispering up to the fourth floor. There was an apartment door standing open opposite the elevator when I got out. Jane Benton said: "Rex—oh-h-h, darling!" and held out her arms to me.

The light was behind her, making a soft halo of her ash-gold hair, limning the silhouette of her dainty figure through the negligee she wore. It

seemed odd to see her so lightly clad when I was accustomed to her in severe business clothes, man-tailored, never provocative.

Now, for the first time, I realized that she was very charming, very feminine. And with that realization came the further knowledge that I had wanted to see her this way for a long time—ever since that day, more than a year ago, when I had engaged her as my private secretary. The desire had been dormant and unrecognized within me, but it was alive and satisfied now. I was just a little startled by that feeling of gratification.

Even more startling was the sensation of having her in my arms, tightly, vibrantly, her firm breast lifting against my chest, her fragrance tingling in my nostrils. She felt warm and soft and desirable through the gossamer thinness of the negligee—

She broke away from me, her face deep pink with blushes, and backed into her apartment. I followed, closing the door after me. Her hand fluttered toward her heart.

"I—I'm sorry, Mr. Randolph. I don't know what made me . . . d-do that. I g-guess I'm overwrought, seeing you here when I thought you were . . ."

"I escaped," I told her. "And I'm glad you acted that way. It was pleasant in more ways than one."

"More ways—?"

"At least it proved your loyalty. You won't turn me in, will you?" That was an unnecessary question, of course. She had proven more than mere loyalty by opening her embrace as well as her apartment to me. I had a deep inner feeling that I'd

found sanctuary here, and something far more vital as well.

The conviction made me hate myself for ever having entertained the slightest doubt about Jane. It seemed no longer significant that she had worked for Tobias Brewster before coming into my office. . . .

Tobias Brewster, the man I stood accused of shooting. . . .



REMEMBERED the story she had told me, that day I hired her. Brewster had accused her of a petty theft and had threatened to have her arrested unless she accepted his advances. He had pawed her, tried to kiss her, had torn her blouse open in his clumsy-fingered ardor. My own office was under his and she had taken refuge there, told me her troubles. That was when she became my own secretary—and I had gone to Brewster, threatened to punch his ugly head off if he made any further trouble.

Yes, Jane had good reason to hate and perhaps even fear the man. But she had not shot him last night, had not sent me that anonymous note which placed me under suspicion. I knew these things now, knew them with an intuitive sureness past all argument.

She looked at me across the breadth of her little living room. "Turn you in?" Her blue eyes widened. "You know I wouldn't do that! You're welcome to stay here as long as you want to. But—what about the police, Mr. Randolph? Do you think you may have been followed. . . ?"

"No, I don't think so." I studied the lilting symmetry of her figure as

she stood there before me, her ankles slender, her lips delicate contoured, her breast proud and erect and tempting beneath the thin negligee that covered it without concealment. "And can't you stop calling me Mr. Randolph? It's Rex."

"Y-yes, Rex . . . oh, my poor darling! You're in such terrible trouble!" She came close to me again, her arms outstretched. "If I could only do something to help!"

I crushed her, the hunger in my veins gnawing like fire upon tinder. "Aren't you even going to ask me if I'm guilty?"

"No. Because I know you're not. I'm positive of it."

Her words stopped the kiss with which I hunted for her willing mouth. I began to have doubts again, despite my intuition. How could she be so sure of my innocence—unless she had certain knowledge which she could have gained in only one way?

She seemed to read my thoughts. "I know you too well to think of you as a . . . a killer. I've known you more than a year. I—I've loved you that long, Rex."

"Loved me?"

"You could have had . . . anything I've got to give . . . just for the asking. But you never asked."

A tide of yearning scalded through me, told me what a blind fool I had been all these months; what an utter, arrant fool—because of a mistaken belief in the obligations I owed to my wife!

The wife who'd played me for a sucker the whole time, who'd had affair after sordid affair under my very nose! The wife whose last lover lay now with a bullet through his fat belly!

Those thoughts made me maul Jane Benton closer to me, and I buried my face in the sweet hollow of her throat, tried to blot out the ugliness of the things that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. Then I lifted her toward a couch against the wall, hungry to bind her to me in a way that could never be erased.

But a buzzing sound put a stop to

that before it had begun. Jane stirred, freed herself. "Someone downstairs!" she whispered sharply. "I wonder—"

"Better answer."

She went to the speaking tube that led to the lobby. "Yes?"

"Who is it?" I asked when she turned to me.

"Charlie Hornigle. He wants to

I had started for the window when she overtook me.
"This time you'll fry!" she screamed.



know if you're here. Says he must see you. Important."

"Let him come up. Charlie's the one who helped me make my getaway."

JANE pressed the button that unlocked that downstairs door. Bye and bye Charlie Hornigle entered the room, his cheeks pinched, his eyes panicky behind their thick lenses.

"Rex, you've got to get out of here!" he blurted desperately. "I just heard a police call on my car radio. The dragnet's out for you—and this is one of the places they're going to search. Don't ask me why they'd suspect you of being with your secretary. They do suspect it, that's the main thing. I was afraid they might be right, so I came here to warn you."

That hunted feeling hit me again, deep in the stomach. There was something deadly and implacable in the way the law closed in on you when you were a fugitive, hounding you and seeking you out in the most improbable places. In the eyes of the police in general, I was wanted for attempted homicide and I had escaped while being taken to the district attorney's office for grilling. Nothing else mattered. Innocent or not, I was the quarry in a city-wide manhunt.

And my getaway had been fruitless! The consequences I had hoped for had not materialized!

I forced myself to smile at Charlie Hornigle. "You're a pal, Charlie. But it looks as if you've gone to all your troubles for nothing."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm sunk," I shrugged. "They'll nab me in spite of every-

thing. I might as well face it. The most I can hope for is that Tobias Brewster pulls through. Then all they can charge me with is assault with intent to kill. But if he dies from that bullet in his guts—"

"Look, Rex. You mustn't give up now I'll get you out of this. God knows you had reason enough to shoot that old goat. And you deserve a break."

His earnestness sent a curious kind of gratitude through me. I seemed to be finding all sorts of loyalty in my employees. Charlie was my chief clerk at the office—and another former member of Tobias Brewster's staff, a distant relative who'd come to me because of the greater opportunities for advancement my brokerage business offered. This morning Charlie had even given a blood transfusion to Brewster in an effort to keep him alive, hoping thus to save me from the capital charge of murder.

I said: "What have you in mind?"

"The fire-escape. My car's in the rear. At least you won't be here when the police come searching."

Jane moved forward. "He's right, Rex. You must go. Now. Quickly. And when—if they question me, I'll say I haven't seen you. I promise." Her lips met mine, unshamed, to seal the bargain. Charlie was decent enough to turn away as she fused her body to me.

Presently I said I was ready. Jane led me to a window. The fire-escape was a wet steel spiderweb, rusty in the rain, cold to the touch, the flakes scaling off to stain your hands red when you grasped the rungs—a stain that reminded me somehow of blood.

I clambered downward in the

darkness, with Charlie Hornigle following.

IN HIS car, it was like starting a remembered sequence all over again, except that this time I had no definite destination. Certainly I couldn't expect Charlie to get me out of town; all roads would be blocked, all cars stopped for examination by the police dragnet. The night was a cul-de-sac, a closing trap. The memory of Jane's succulent crimson lips on mine was all that kept me to my purpose.

And even that memory was marred by the readiness she had shown to have me leave her apartment, to have me resume my flight into nowhere.

I turned to Charlie as he drove through the storm. "There's one place they might not think to look for me."

"Where?"

"Home," I said. The word tasted bitter on my tongue. Home! The place where I'd been duped and fooled and tricked. . . .

There was irony in that situation. Tobias Brewster had been too critically wounded to be moved to a hospital. They'd carried him from the front yard, where that bullet had struck him down, to my room upstairs. There he had remained. There he was yet. Home, indeed!

The word seemed to disturb Charlie Hornigle, too. "But Rex—my God, suppose Laurine—"

"I'll handle Laurine," I said evenly.

He misunderstood me. "No, Rex. You're in trouble enough now. If you pull any more rough stuff—"

"I won't."

"You're not forgetting there's a police nurse with Brewster, are you? If you're seen, you're sunk."

"I'll risk that. Drive faster."

He headed for the suburbs, for Crestlawn where I'd lived in a fool's paradise. I got out in front of the house that had cost me thirty thousand dollars and immeasurable bitterness, the house I had built for a wanton. Only I had not known the kind of woman my wife was, then.

I knew it now.

"Bye, Charlie," I said. "And thanks again for everything." I watched him drive off.

Then I went to the porch, used my key on the front door, walked into my private hell.

I said: "Hello, Laurine."

SHE was small and dark and defiantly self-possessed, ordinarily. But not now. She leaped up from an easy chair, whirled, stared at me with bewildered eyes in which fear began to flicker. Her face went gray under too much makeup, leaving her mouth a twisted scarlet splash of lipstick against blankness.

"Rex—!"

"I'm back." I took a step toward her.

It was not a threatening step but she seemed to think so. In all the time we had lived together I had never seen her features so contorted as now. It was a wrinkling grimace, monkeylike, the teeth bared, the delicate nostrils dilated then pinched in as she drew breath frantically through them. Her hands shoved out at me, even though the distance of the room separated us.

"Rex—no! You mustn't! You can't!"

"I can't what?"

"Do—do to me what you—you did to—"

"Your lover," I supplied.

Her voice was a sudden whine. "Rex, he's upstairs. It's nip and tuck whether he lives or d-dies. The doctor just left. Just told me. Any excitement might—"

"Does it matter so much to you whether Tobias Brewster lives or dies?" I asked her. "Or is it your own pretty neck you're worried about?"

She moved backward until the wall stopped her. It was a wall paneled in white satin, an interior decoration of her own devising, and it made her crimson lounging pajamas seem all the redder by comparison; made her raven hair seem all the blacker in contrast. A pulse throbbed visibly in her throat and her small breasts rose and fell painfully under the pajama jacket that caressed them.

She had been smoking when I walked in; had dropped her cigarette on the rug when she heard my footfalls. Now I could smell the acrid odor of burning wool nap, even over Laurine's too-blatant perfume. It was a welcome stink, one I preferred to her expensive imported scent. It kept me from remembering past intimacies, spurious endearments, dead passions.

I felt the muscles of my lips twitching, the mouth corners lifting in a grin beyond my control. "So you think I'm planning to kill you."

"Rex—you wouldn't!" she whispered in a voice like the rustle of dry leaves. Then a hint of curiosity mingled with the fear in her eyes. "What are you doing here? How

did you get out of j-jail? Were you released?"

"That *would* frighten you, wouldn't it?" I countered, realizing the trend of her thoughts. "Then you'd know that I had proved myself innocent. And you'd be afraid the next police suspect would be you!" I grinned again.

Her jaw went slack. "Me? Oh, but—but they can't! They mustn't! Rex, don't let that happen to me! Don't let them—"

"You needn't worry. Nobody has even thought of you in connection with what happened to Brewster last night. You're in the clear, thus far."

Relief washed some of the wrinkles from her face. But then the other fear returned. "Th-then why are you here, Rex?"

"I escaped from custody."

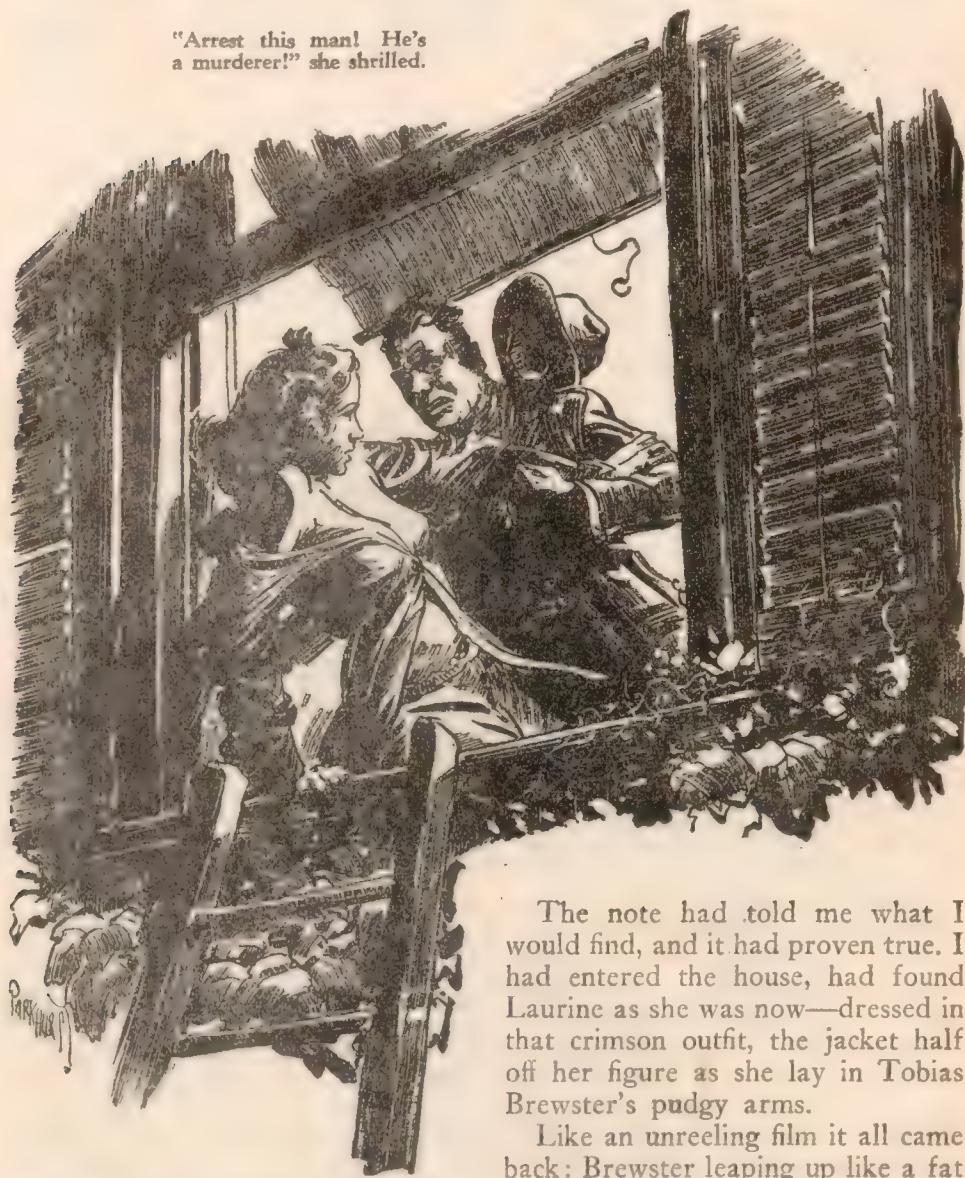
"You escaped . . . ? And now you've come back to . . . no, Rex! For God's sake, you mustn't! I won't let you kill me. You wouldn't do that. Not after what we've meant to each other.. Look at me, Rex. Remember all the times we . . ."

WITH a sudden gesture she raised her palsied hands to the neck of the crimson pajama coat and ripped the silken material open from throat to waist, trying to buy her life with the only price she had available.

Once I might have been thrilled at her pagan loveliness, the white splendor of her body. Once the sight of her charms would have drawn me like a magnet, and I would have mauled her savagely in my arms, harvested ripe kisses from her liar's mouth. But not any more. She had lost the power to arouse me.

Instead of recalling the times she

"Arrest this man! He's a murderer!" she shrilled.



wanted me to recall, the long hot nights of what I had deemed passionate ecstasy, I was remembering a night more recent; last night. Without even closing my eyes I saw again the anonymous note that had brought me home ahead of time when, by my usual schedule, I should have been working late at my office. . . .

The note had told me what I would find, and it had proven true. I had entered the house, had found Laurine as she was now—dressed in that crimson outfit, the jacket half off her figure as she lay in Tobias Brewster's pudgy arms.

Like an unreeling film it all came back: Brewster leaping up like a fat harried animal, running to the door, hurling himself awkwardly into the night.

Laurine jumping at me, trying to impede me, trying to keep me from following her clandestine lover. My doubled fist striking her in the face, knocking her backward. My own vengeful pursuit of Brewster.

Then the silent lance of flame across the darkness of the front lawn. The curious wheezing cry from Brewster's throat as he pitched forward on his face. My realization that he had been shot through the belly—and Laurine's wildcat attack on me from behind as she screamed for help at the top of her lungs. The arrival of the neighbors, and, presently, the police. Laurine's finger pointing at me, her voice saying: "He did it! He fired the shot!"

Now I was hunted, seeking refuge in my own home. And this beautiful thing who was my wife had the brazeness to half bare her body before me and offer me a flesh bribe!

I sneered at her. "You might as well cover yourself, Laurine. I'm not interested in shopworn merchandise. And I didn't come here to kill you, anyhow. Not unless you force me to it."

"Force you?"

"I'm going to hide here. It's the one place the police won't look for me. Unless you give me away. And if that happens, I'll break your neck." I turned, made for the staircase.

She came at me and fastened her clawing fingers on my arm. "You—you're going up to him! You know he's asleep, know the nurse is out of the house for a while. You want to finish what you started last night!"

I shook her off. "I'm not that foolish," I said. "Now let me alone." I went up to the bathroom to wash my hands of the rust-red stains from Jane Benton's fire-escape.

For a good reason I did not switch on the bathroom lights. For an equally good reason I opened the window and looked out across the

grounds, searched for any sign of movement below. Sure enough, someone was lurking down there in the rain, coming toward the house—someone in a tailored ranicoat, hatless, her ash-gold hair wet and sodden.

Jane Benton!

A SINKING sensation hit me in the pit of the stomach. Had it been Jane last night, after all? Had it been her finger on the trigger of that silenced gun, her bullet that had felled Tobias Brewster? They say a murderer always returns to the scene of his crime. Was it as true of a would-be murderer, one who'd wounded instead of killed? Was this the reason Jane was here now?

Cutting across my thoughts, a scream sounded.

It was shrill and raw and rasping, high-pitched and hideous as a voice out of hell. It was my wife's scream, coming from my own bedroom in the fore part of the house—the room where Tobias Brewster lay with a bullet in his intestines.

I sped silently along the hallway, reached the open bedroom door, crossed the threshold. Laurine spun around, her face pasty in the dim light from a shaded bed-lamp that filled most of the chamber with creeping shadows.

Unmindful of her torn-open pajama jacket, she aimed a finger at me. "You did it! I knew you would! You came in here and cut his throat—!"

I looked at Brewster's fat carcass, saw the gaping wound across his gullet from which no blood welled. I knew that he was dead, and I turned toward the open window where the

rain beat in to make a soggy mess of the curtains. The top of a ladder rested against the dripping sill, and the hiss of the downpour outside made a background for another sound, a steady whirring whisper.

There was no mistaking its meaning. And if I had felt hunted before, it was nothing to the indescribable sensation of dread that gripped me now. Here was Tobias Brewster with his throat slashed open, and downstairs in the yard was Jane Benton....

Then I heard her startled outcry, men's grunts, the slogging shuffle of feet on soaked turf. "Rex—help me—I!" That was Jane calling. I sprang toward the windowsill, trying to straddle it and go down the ladder.

Laurine blocked me like a brunette fury. "No you don't! This time you'll fry!" she caterwauled. With inhuman strength she batten ed to me, hauled at me.

FROM the open bedroom doorway a growling voice said: "That'll be enough. Come along, both of you." It was Detective Lieutenant Shawn of the homicide bureau, a swollen bruise on his jaw where I had butted him when I escaped in front of police headquarters with the help of Charlie Hornigle.

Laurine untangled herself from me, her eyes blazing, her body quivering. "Arrest this man! He's a murderer! Take him to jail!"

"We'll all go," Shawn answered her quietly. "Get dressed. Make it snappy." He had two plainclothes officers with him, and he detailed one of them to guard Laurine while she

slipped into a topcoat and galoshes. The second detective came over to me, pulled at my sleeve and led me downstairs. Shawn remained in the bedroom for a moment, but oddly enough he did not seem particularly interested in Tobias Brewster's corpse. As I left the room he was moving toward a closet, almost eagerly.

The subsequent hour of waiting at Headquarters was the longest nightmare I have ever experienced, the ugliest I shall ever know. I was confined in a little office, alone, with no chance to find out what had happened to Jane Benton; no chance to talk to her. When finally I did see her it was only for a brief instant as she was being led from another anteroom, down a long corridor and into a larger office at the rear of the building—even as I myself was likewise conducted in that direction.

"Jane!" I called to her.

She turned, tried to twist away from the police matron who had her in tow.

"Rex . . . oh-h-h, my darling . . . then you *were* in that house! I thought you might go there, and I followed . . . but I was caught in the garden. . . ."

"You hadn't been near that ladder?"

"No—"

Relief seethed into my marrow when I heard the denial. But there was no further opportunity for talk. The matron hustled Jane into that darkened room at the end of the passageway and she was lost in shadows.

My own guard took me into the lightless place, steered me to a chair and made me sit down. All around

me I could hear sharp breathing, tense, expectant, uneasy....

A light blazed on from an eye-like aperture at the back of the room, slashing a widening cone shaped funnel of brilliance through the darkness and reflecting back from a white square screen on the far wall. Into this spotlight stepped Lieutenant Shawn, like an actor on a stage facing his audience.

"I think we have everybody here who's involved in this thing," he said slowly. "Presently we'll exhibit something that ought to close the case once and for all. Meantime, though, I'd like to explain a few matters."

There was an electrical silence that you could almost feel and taste. And there was the *smell* of fear.

SHAWN went on, choosing his words. "To begin with all of you may as well know that Rex Randolph's escape from custody this evening was prearranged—with my consent. Although he needn't have butted me on the jaw quite so hard," he added, ruefully rubbing the bruise.

I leaned forward on my chair, listening, wondering.

"I contrived Randolph's getaway for a good reason," Shawn continued. "For one thing, there was evidence that he had not been the one who shot Tobias Brewster. A paraffine test of his hands showed that he had not discharged any firearms last night, silenced or otherwise. Therefore we had no reason to hold him."

Well, there it was, my complete exoneration. But the story was just starting.

Shawn said: "To pick Brewster's assailant from the long list

of all the people who hated or feared him would have been a difficult task. Consequently we decided to try a scheme that might bring the killer into the open; a trap. When I say killer, I mean exactly that. For Brewster died of his wound, late this afternoon."

Out of the darkness came my wife's harsh exclamation. "But they told me he was still alive! The doctor—the nurse—"

"All part of the trap, Mrs. Randolph," Shawn said evenly. "It was necessary for the murderer to believe the victim not yet dead. We hoped this would bring forth a second attempt to kill Brewster, an attempt to finish a job that had been bungled. But first it was essential that we give our suspect an opportunity. Enough rope, as you might say."

"My God...!" came a frightened semi-whisper from the darkness that lay as thick as gruel beyond that cone of brilliant glare. It was Jane Benton's voice. Hearing it, I fought back an ugly suspicion crowding into my brain.

Shawn said: "The shooting of Tobias Brewster was a premeditated crime. We know this from the circumstantial evidence. First, the fact that Brewster was Laurine Randolph's clandestine lover. Next, the fact that somebody knew about it and sent an anonymous letter to Laurine's husband, Rex Randolph, tipping him off.

"Naturally, Randolph went home to investigate the accusation. He found his wife in Brewster's arms, chased the man out of the house—and into the path of a silenced bullet. The shooting was staged in such a way that Randolph would appear

guilty, his motive that of a betrayed husband. A very clever frame-up."

"Can't you come to the point?" Laurine shrilled from the shadows, her tone edgy with incipient hysteria.

"Very well," Shawn nodded. "We concluded that a second murder attempt would be forthcoming if Randolph escaped. The killer would feel free to finish his job because Randolph, being on the loose, would be the logical suspect. It afforded a second golden opportunity to frame an innocent man.

"Counting on this, Randolph was to establish an alibi by hiding in the apartment of his secretary, Miss Jane Benton. At that point, though, there was an unexpected hitch. I had not taken the entire police department into my confidence concerning the escape of my supposed prisoner. Consequently a dragnet went out for him and it became necessary for him to hunt other shelter."

"So he came home to kill Mr. Brewster!" my wife squalled.

Shawn shook his head. "No, because he knew Brewster was already dead. The trap was set for someone else who did *not* know that fact. And now, if you will be patient, I'll exhibit a motion picture film which shows that person entering the bedroom and cutting the throat of a corpse."

"You're crazy!" Laurine leaped into the shaft of light. "That room wasn't bright enough to take movies—"

"There was a camera concealed in a closet, loaded with infra-red film sensitive even in darkness," Shawn's answer hammered her back into her chair, relentlessly. "I had the doctor plant it there before he left. The

nurse also went from the house, leaving the killer a clear track. Watch."

AT Shawn's signal the shaft of cone-shaped brilliance took on life and movement. While I had waited in that headquarters anteroom, this movie was being developed, printed. Now it scrawled its mobile message on the screen. . . .

There was the bedroom, my bedroom, with Tobias Brewster's pudgy corpse on my bed. There was the window being opened from outside, and a dim figure in tailored topcoat climbing in over the sill. The shadow-shape moved to the bed, slashed downward with a knife.

Nothing mattered after that. The following scenes were anti-climax. I suppose there must have been a view of the murderer going back out the window, then Laurine coming in and discovering the body and screaming, and my own entrance. These things were unimportant, because meanwhile there had been one clear glimpse of the intruder's face—

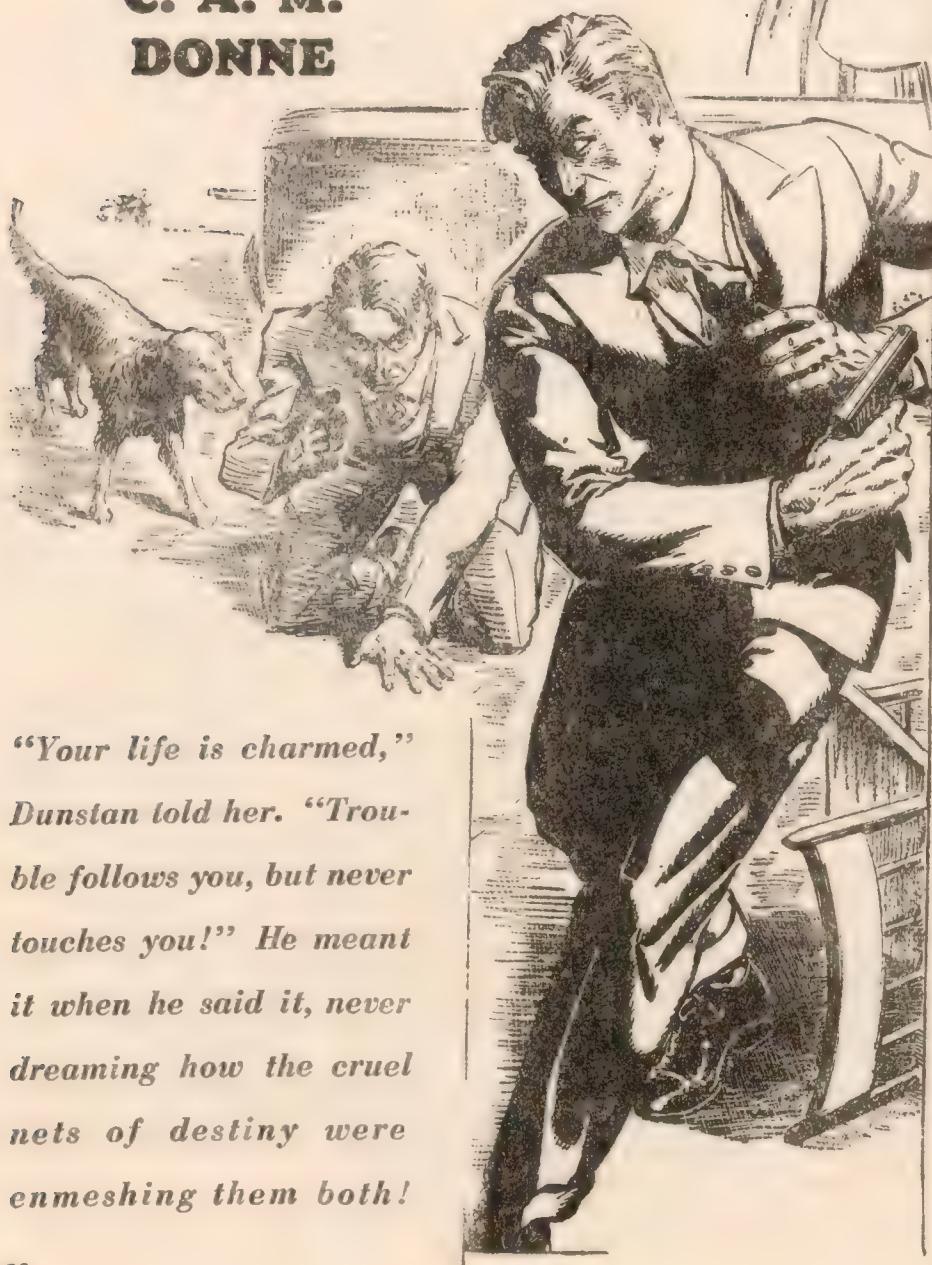
"You won't take me alive!" That was Charlie Hornigle shouting as he leaped into motion in this makeshift movie theater. He had a silenced gun and he blasted a path toward freedom with a whispering barrage of bullets.

Detective Lieutenant Shawn coolly took aim, shot him through the chest. "You were the only man who'd have profited by Tobias Brewster's death, Hornigle. You were his only relative, a distant one but his legal heir. You sent the anonymous note to Rex Randolph and tried to pin the kill on him."

Somebody snapped on the room's
(Continued on page 107)

B I G

By
C. A. M.
DONNE



*"Your life is charmed,"
Dunstan told her. "Trou-
ble follows you, but never
touches you!" He meant
it when he said it, never
dreaming how the cruel
nets of destiny were
enmeshing them both!*

GAME



FIRST the limousine slowed just above Fifty-sixth Street, where it wasn't supposed to, and that fact alone was enough to stiffen Joe Dunstan's spine and make wary slits of his eyes. Then at Dunstan's side in the back seat there

sounded a soft whine from Brian McGraw of Liecester Farms, the great red Irish setter that hunted Manhattan's jungles with him—and Brian didn't talk without good reason.

Dunstan leaned forward, not yet reaching for the clipped Colt at his



On his hands and knees, in a complete haze, he got to his feet.

left armpit, but spreading the fingers of his right hand in readiness.

"What's up, Tommy?" he asked his gnarled little chauffeur.

"I made a date fer yuh, Mr. Dunstan," Tommy Kilgore said slyly, bearing down on the brakes, watching the entrances of a row of walk-up flats at the right. "In about a second—"

In less than a second the girl ran from one of the doorways into the street, her slim legs flashing in the blue-white rays of street lamps. Dunstan couldn't see her clearly, but he knew her, as he would know her anywhere.

"Carol!" he cried, reaching for the door handle, forgetting his presentiment of danger in the tall excitement of her nearness.

The guns banged then, two of them, one from a gray sedan across the street and one from a recessed doorway, so that they caught the girl and the limousine in a crossfire. They shot ruled lines of scarlet across the post-midnight dusk, slapped a triangular jag out of the window at Dunstan's left. Flattened chunks of lead squealed over the pavement close to the girl's frantic feet.

The shaggy setter snarled upright, bared fangs and bristling mane belying the famed friendliness of the breed. Brian McGraw showed no fear of the slamming weapons of man; a furious loyalty to one master was all that motivated him.

"Down!" Dunstan snapped. "This is my meat, boy!"

Brian dropped to the floor reluctantly, never dreaming of defying the authority of the lean man with the glittering dark eyes.

Dunstan's automatic barked and spat, kicking four-ounce slugs toward the invisible gunners. Shattered glass from the gray sedan made a tinkling undertone to the bellowing fire. In the apartment entrance a man screamed, shrill as a woman.

The sedan lurched ahead, gears howling, tires bleating.

Tommy Kilgore gasped, "Jeeze, boss, I didn't know—Oh my gawd, they got her!"

Dunstan scarcely heard him. Dunstan leaped from the car, plunging toward the small figure lying in the mellow radiance of the headlamps.

"Carol!" Stooping, he lifted the slender girlish body in the golden dinner gown. Honey-colored hair clung to his shoulder, curved legs clothed in gossamer silk swung limply over his arm. He saw the way her long lashes nestled against pallid cheeks scarcely touched with rouge, and glanced across the breast, seeking the trace of a wound and terrified at the thought of finding it.

His heart thudded. His gaunt face was tender and fierce at once.

THIE long lashes fluttered. Blue eyes focused upon his features. A throaty voice murmured, "Joe! Oh, Joe—I didn't think they'd follow me!"

"They won't, any more," he said. "Where are you hit?"

"I wasn't hit. I stumbled and fell. I'm afraid I ruined my stocking."

He looked at her half in anger, and laughed with a trace of bitterness.

"I forgot. Your life is charmed, isn't it? Trouble follows but never

touches you. . . . Wait till I see who stopped my lead across the street, then we'll talk."

Bitterness or none, he carried her to the limousine and put her very gently in the back seat beside Brian McGraw, and the touch of his hands was a caress as they drew away from her warm loveliness. . . .

He hurried, before the noise of the shots should bring police cars howling to the scene. A great radio singer, which Carol Barrett was, didn't need the kind of publicity that stems from street shootings in the middle of the night.

A dead man was huddled in the apartment entrance, a revolver lying near one lax hand, a smear from a heart wound staining the jacket of a checked suit. Dunstan tilted back the lifeless face, nodded grimly to himself.

Joe Dunstan knew the predatory beasts of the city canyons, the rhythm-filled night clubs, and the smoke-packed gambling rooms as well as once he had known the ways of the lion, the tiger and the water-buffalo, before he had given up the pursuit of big game to chase bigger game. A sportsman and hunter all his life, he was a sportsman and hunter still, with the difference that now he hunted to benefit society, instead of to despoil the wilds of far countries.

Yet he might not have risked his life so recklessly in the hunt if Carol had been willing to marry him, instead of preferring a career studded with contracts containing "no marriage" clauses.

He did not regret this newest insert testimonial to his deadly gunskill, as sometimes in the past he had

regretted the death of a lordly moose or kodiak bear. This man, sprawled on the pavement, was Jules Burkman, terrorist and killer, lately in the employ of Andy Ahern, who had raised blackmail, extortion, and kindred crimes to the level of big business.

IT HAPPENED that Andy Ahern had been in Dunstan's mind all evening, ever since Dunstan had talked to young Howard Wanderford, of the Newport and Palm Beach Wanderfords. The youngster had been cutting a wide and spectacular swath in cafe society for a year, and strangely enough the worst trouble he had managed to get in was to become the victim of a burglary.

"But not a burglary to be reported to the police," Wanderford had stressed. "They didn't touch anything that could be pawned or sold through a fence. All they took was a drawerful of—well, mementoes. You know, letters from girls, pictures. Some of them were pretty much—you know."

Right then Dunstan had started thinking of Andy Ahern.

"I'm afraid of blackmail," Wanderford went on, his good-looking face reddening from square chin to the roots of wavy brown hair. "Both for myself and for some of the girls concerned. I've heard you can take a picture of a girl in a bathing suit, and with an airbrush and some rephotographing—"

"It has been done," Dunstan said. "The woman have more cause to worry than you. Who are they?"

But Wanderford shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not a heel. I won't

tell unless it becomes absolutely necessary. But I'll be in touch with them, and if any of them gets in trouble I'll let you know."

Dunstan had to let it go at that.

Now, as he trotted back to the limousine, he remembered that it wasn't so long ago that the Broadway columns had remarked on the frequency with which Carol Barrett and Howard Wanderford had been seen together under the bright lights.

SHE sat deep in the cushions of a low sofa in his Central Park West apartment, sipping the tall drink he had mixed for her. Sitting opposite, he couldn't help noticing the way her crossed knees tossed back the golden sheen of her flared skirt.

His eyes smoldered and the palms of his hands were hot and damp, and anger was only one of many emotions that warred within him as he heard her story.

"A messenger boy brought me an envelope containing photostats of pictures taken at the beach and letters I had written." She shuddered. "But the pictures had been changed, Joe, and parts of the letters had been forged. It was awful!"

He said, "Where are they?"

"I burned them. I'd never let anyone see them. An hour after the boy left a man telephoned me, saying I could have the originals of the photostats for fifty thousand dollars; otherwise copies would be sent to all my friends and the people I work for. My reputation would be ruined, and so would my career."

"Your career," he said, hating it. But for that, they would have been

married. "What did you tell the man?"

"That I wouldn't pay, no matter what he did. That I'd spend twice that much trying to send him to prison, but not one cent to buy him off. And he said I'd be watched, and if I tried to reach the police or a private detective, I'd be killed."

"He meant it. They'll try again."

"I tried to fool them, Joe. I didn't go to you directly. I called Tommy Kilgore at the garage, and Tommy said he'd be driving you home a certain way, and if I waited near that corner he'd stop for me. I was careful and didn't think they could follow me. They're smart, whoever they are."

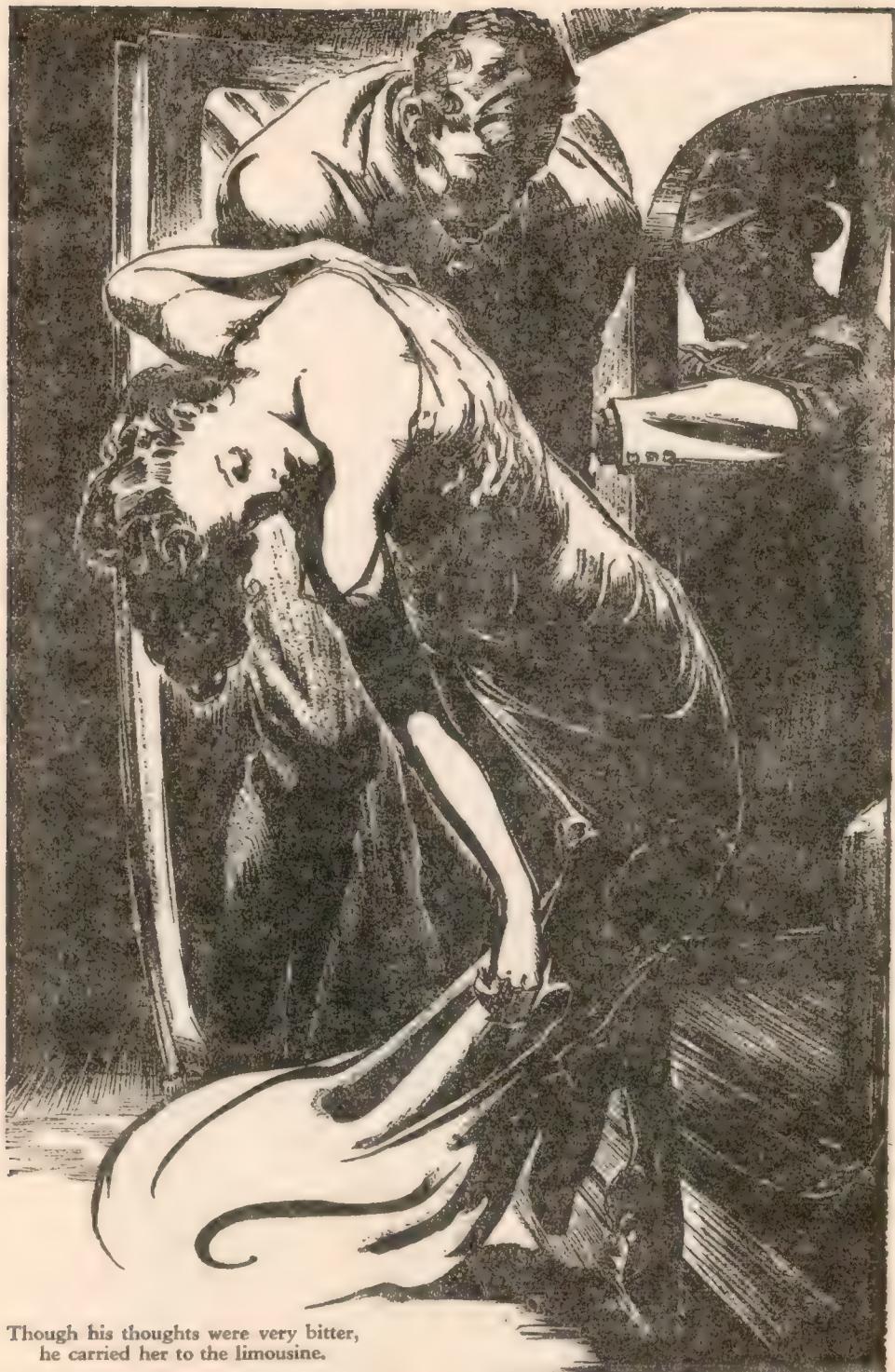
"Smart enough not to leave a shred of evidence." Even the corpse of Jules Burkman didn't prove anything, he reflected. "Where did the letters and pictures come from originally?"

She bit her lip. "I'd rather not . . ."

"I talked to Wanderford this evening." A corkscrew of jealousy twisted in his chest. "About a robbery. You—do you love him, Carol?"

"No. I never did, really. After you and I quarreled about whether a career or marriage was more important, I went around with him for a while. We were at night clubs and the beach, and I guess I was half in love with him at first; but . . ."

She stopped, seeing the tortured expression in his eyes, understanding it perfectly. This man who had loved her so intensely was trying to believe what she was saying about Wanderford, but couldn't help remembering the adage that where



Though his thoughts were very bitter,
he carried her to the limousine.

there is smoke there is frequently fire. He was tormented by the thought of another man.

She whispered, "Joe. . . ."

"It's all right, Carol. Whatever you do is always all right with me."

She arose, her skirt slipping down to hide the sleek beauty of her knees. Her hands reached his shoulders as he stood up to meet her, and her eyes were liquid azure.

"You have no rival except my work, Joe. You never had."

Just for an instant he held himself rigid, as one unsure of himself. Then his arms were around her and his mouth was crushing her flower-soft lips, and he was trembling as he had never trembled in the face of death or danger. He could feel her slim figure shaken by their heartbeats. The fragrance of her was in his nostrils, heady as strong wine, and from her lips came little whimpering sounds that meant nothing—and everything. . . .

SOME of the strain and worry had departed from him, but the grim purpose that had been in his mind since the firing of that first shot blazed twice as fiercely within him.

He kissed her and turned to Tommy Kilgore, whom he had summoned from the lobby.

"If you close your eyes once while I'm away, you Irish baboon—"

Fingering the pistol Dunstan had given him, Kilgore promised, "So help me, Mr. Dunstan, I'll blow my brains out the minute I catch myself so much as thinkin' of it."

With Brian McGraw at his heels, Dunstan went to the elevator and rode to the eighth floor. He pressed

the buzzer of an apartment there; kept pressing it till the door opened and a frowsy head appeared.

"What the devil—" Howard Wanderford asked irritably. "Oh, come in, Dunstan. My God, what a time to come visiting!"

"Nonsense," Dunstan said. "Usually you don't go to bed till daylight. Have you heard from your burglar friends yet?"

"Not a word."

"A couple of Andy Ahern's hoodlums tried to kill Carol Barrett tonight."

Wanderford paled. "Tried to kill her! Why—"

"She wouldn't pay blackmail. She asked me to help her."

The young man sank into a chair, shivering in his blue pajamas, and Brian McGraw sniffed at him inquisitively.

"Listen, Dunstan, I know you think a lot of Carol. So do I. I want you to know, however bad they may have made those pictures and letters look, there was never anything between us that—well—"

"I know." The lean manhunter smiled. "And if you're worried about those things getting her in any further trouble, stop worrying. I'm going to get your letters back tonight—now—and if I get Ahern at the same time, once and for all, I'll figure it's been good hunting."

Wanderford sat up. "Let me go with you, Dunstan. I've got a gun and know how to use it. I wouldn't mind risking my life to go after rats that would try to kill a girl like Carol."

Dunstan shook his head. "Go back to bed. I'll tell you about it when it's over." |

Not a bad fellow, Wanderford, in some ways, Dunstan thought as he rode the elevator to the street. Irresponsible and wild, but with a certain amount of guts when they were needed.

"What did you think of him, boy?" he asked Brian.

But that expert on human character was busy at the moment, investigating a hydrant.

DUNSTAN drove the limousine to East Eighty-sixth Street and parked a few doors from the modest apartment house where Ahern was known to spend much time with a night club dancer who called herself Sally Southwaite. Leaving the disappointed setter in the car—for Dunstan never exposed the animal to bullets when he could avoid it—he went to the outer lobby and pushed three or four bell buttons, avoiding that opposite Sally's name. When the electric lock chattered he went in and took the self-service elevator to the fourth floor.

He unclipped his automatic again and held it in his fist before he knocked. Waiting, he heard quick footsteps and a girl's voice: "Who is it?"

"Andy," he said, deepening his voice.

The door opened. "I thought you weren't coming back—"

Dunstan pushed. There was a thud and a squeal, and the door swung wide. He saw a girl with red hair, wrapped in a Chinese silk kimono, staggering back through the narrow hallway. One of her high-heeled slippers caught in a fold of the carpet and she fell. Silk-clad legs waved.

"You big tramp!" the girl yelled. "You dopey—"

Dunstan grinned. "I'm looking for Andy."

"He isn't here. He won't be here. Now scram!" She sat up gathering the kimono about her shapely form. Her sultry eyes took in his figure and some of the anger went out of them. "Wait a minute. Who are you?"

"Just a friend of his. Names don't matter."

"Then why the gat?"

He said, "In this business a guy doesn't know what he's stepping into. I've seen men turn up their toes because they didn't have a gun handy when they needed it."

The girl stood up, and now she was inclined to be friendly. "You look like a right guy. Andy isn't here and won't be here tonight, but that doesn't mean you have to rush away." Her red lips pouted. "I'm lonesome, and besides he's been making a play for a washed-out blonde at the Clipper Club."

"I'll come in for a minute." Dunstan kept his pistol ready and stepped warily into the living room. No one was there, or in the kitchenette or the bedroom. He put the gun back in his pocket.

THE redhead had wrapped the kimono around her small body again, but in such a way that not much was left to the imagination. Her eyes were sultry again and the pout of her red lips was inviting.

She moved close to him. "You think I'm nice?"

"Nice to look at, anyway." She was all of that, and at another time her proximity and their aloneness

might have set his pulses drumming. But not now.

Yet, he thought, she could probably tell him things he needed to know about Ahern, and the letters and pictures that could ruin Carol, and where they were and who else had knowledge of them. And he was aware that the shrewdest woman is most pliable under the stress of romantic emotions.

He put out his hands and caught her arms. She needed little urging; in an instant her lithe contours were against him and her arms were around his neck, drawing his head down to meet her lips.

He was almost ashamed of the sharp thrill that went through him as her soft moist mouth received that kiss.

His arms tightened around her, his hands stroking the curves of her back. He loved Carol, and cared nothing for this girl in his arms, and yet strangely he felt the beat of the same emotion that had overwhelmed him earlier.

She murmured, "Honey—"

Then, with surprising strength and agility, she put the palms of her hands against his chest and thrust with all her might, pushing herself free of his embrace, pushing him back from her.

She screamed, "Take him, Andy!"

Dunstan spun, reaching for his pistol. He faced the ugly snouts of two revolvers, and raised his arms, scowling into the leering faces of Andy Ahern and Big Ben Milo, who was Ahern's right-hand man. Dunstan cursed the stupidity that had let him walk naively into this trap.

He said, "I want you for attempted murder and blackmail!"

Ahern, thin and sardonic, smirked. "What you want, Pal Joey, and what you're gonna get are two different things. We're gonna send you to hell to settle up with Jules Burkman for them slugs you slipped him tonight."

"People know I'm here. If I don't get back—"

Milo's fat, blue-jowled face looked momentarily sad. "Ain't it too bad we know who them people are and got to take care of them too? Ain't it tough we got to dump all them stiffs in the East River before daylight and—"

"Shut up!" Ahern rasped. "Let's move. Dunstan, we're going to pistol-walk you out of this joint, and if you don't think we'll shoot at the first funny move, try it just once." He took the automatic from beneath Dunstan's coat, dropped it in his pocket and motioned with the revolver barrel.

Dunstan glanced at the girl, who was sitting wide-eyed on the sofa. "So long, Sally. It was nice while it lasted."

"You'd of tricked us," she replied sullenly. "You got nobody but yourself to blame for what happens to you."

Dunstan agreed with her on that.

The guns dug into his back during the brief elevator trip to the street, and he knew it would be suicidal to try to make a break. He stepped out upon the sidewalk and Big Ben shoved him toward a small black sedan at the curb.

"We'd like to hac' a Rolls-Royce for your last ride, chum," Big Ben said lugubriously, "but this was the



The dog leaped as he slapped the
girl with the flat of his pistol.

handiest to borrow. Believe me, we're sorry."

NEITHER of them, apparently, had recognized Dunstan's limousine up the street. Out of the corner of his eye Dunstan saw a moving shape behind the windshield. He hoped Brian McGraw wouldn't bark in his disturbance at seeing his master led away; there was no point in Brian dying, just because Dunstan had to die. Carol would adopt the setter, and with her as mistress Brian shouldn't grieve too much.

Ahern opened the door of the sedan. "Inside, Pal Joey."

As he bent his head to enter the back seat, Dunstan sensed, rather than saw, Ben's arm go up with the revolver. It was natural enough that they should slug him to sleep, to be sure he wouldn't make a break that would necessitate shooting; and it was no less natural that Dunstan should duck, involuntarily, as the smashing blow descended.

He lunged sidewise, his left shoulder knocking Ahern off balance, and the chopping barrel of Ben's gun struck and numbed his right shoulder. Dunstan swung, driving his left elbow into Ben's belly, and the big man grunted.

"Get back!" Ahern yelled. "Let me plug him, Ben!" He had steadied himself, had leveled his gun.

Dunstan couldn't move fast enough either to dodge the slug or attack the killer before he fired. He tried, though, because he preferred to die trying, rather than waiting meekly.

He saw Ahern's finger jerk on the trigger . . . and in the same instant, behind Ahern, he saw a red-

dish-brown streak leaping toward the gunman. He had only time to wonder vaguely how Brian had managed to paw the catch of the limousine's door to open it—and then scarlet flame blossomed in the revolver's mouth and something that felt like a red-hot ax seemed to slice off the top of Dunstan's skull.

There was a glimmering vision of Carol as he dropped into engulfing blackness, then nothing at all. . . .

HE AWOKE with something moist and warm caressing his forehead and the sound of an urgent whine in his ears. The concrete of the sidewalk was beneath him; a street lamp showered rays that hurt his eyes. Memory oozed back a little at a time.

He sat up, and the effort sent blinding waves of pain roaring through his skull. Brian McGraw nuzzled him, and Dunstan put his arms around the furry neck and felt more like bawling than he had in many a day.

The black sedan was gone. Except for himself and the dog and the limousine, the block was empty. His wrist-watch told him he had not been unconscious more than a minute or two.

"Old Brian," he mumbled. "Good old Brian!"

He struggled to his feet, mopping blood from his face with a handkerchief, gingerly feeling of the crease the bullet had made across his skull. He said a little prayer of thankfulness that the gunmen had fled rather than risk firing more shots than that first one; otherwise Brian would probably be dead or crippled.

His ears caught the moan of a police siren.

"Our move, boy," he said, and jogged toward the limousine, his head threatening to burst with every step. He got behind the wheel and started the motor, heading back to his own apartment.

Big Ben had said that he and Ahern were planning to bury other bodies in the East River before the night was ended. . . .

He flung open the door of the apartment and stood on the threshold, staring, while his heart plummeted toward his ankles. No exquisite creature with honey-colored hair lay on his sofa now; even the cushions had been tumbled from it to the floor.

"Tommy!" he called and received no answer.

But he found a stain of blood the size of a saucer in the center of the blue carpet, and behind the cushion of a chair he found the automatic he had given Tommy Kilgore. The coarse fur of Brian's back stood erect and he growled ominously as he explored the rooms.

"Where is she, boy?" Dunstan asked.

Brian knew exactly where she was—whether by instinct or scent, or a combination of both, Dunstan could not tell. All Dunstan knew was that a setter can be trained to track as well as a bloodhound, and that no other dog can surpass him in intelligence.

The lean red creature made for the doorway, padded down the hall to the elevator. As the car descended he pawed at the door, telling Dunstan as plainly as words could have that the eighth floor was what he

wanted. Straight to the door of Howard Wanderford's apartment went the four-footed hunter, and pawed there, and the unlatched door slanted inward.

Dunstan halted in the doorway, seeing Carol Barrett sitting on Wanderford's lap in a big chair.

"Excuse me," Dunstan said, his face white.

Carol gasped, "Oh!" and started to rise, but Wanderford pulled her back. Wanderford said calmly:

"Come in, Dunstan. You may as well know the truth. Carol and I are in love and have been for a long time, and the only reason she wanted it kept from you was because she was afraid it would hurt you. She slipped down here as soon as you left tonight to tell me she had been there and—well, I've forgiven her."

AT DUNSTAN'S knee Brian snarled, as if infuriated at seeing Dunstan hurt in this way. Dunstan said, "Quiet, boy! Lie down!" The setter obeyed.

At least he'll be faithful to me as long as he lives, Dunstan thought. Aloud he said, "Is that true, Carol?"

Her eyes pleaded for understanding as she nodded. "Yes, Joe. I'm sorry if I've disillusioned you. Can't you see how it is?"

"Sure, I can see." He kept his voice flat, toneless. "Good luck to you. By the way, where did Kilgore go?"

"He was in your apartment in the big chair when I left. He tried to stop me."

He rubbed his chin. "Well, I'll let you know how I make out with the blackmailers. I'll get your pictures and letters back, all right."

"No," Wanderford said; and the girl echoed, "No, Joe."

His eyebrows went up. "Why not?"

"Well—" Wanderford seemed nervous. "I—I'm going to buy them back. I had a phone call after you left, offering me the chance. I'd rather spend fifty thousand than have Carol's life endangered. I've talked it over with her, and she's willing, so you can forget all about it."

"All right," Dunstan agreed. "I'll forget that Ahern and Big Ben Milo are the dirtiest blackmailers in America." He turned toward the door, crooking his right arm. "But I won't forget," he rasped, "that they tried to kill Carol, and tried to kill me, and are on my list for extermination."

He whirled back as he spoke, and the automatic he had found upstairs was in his fist. "Get up, Carol!" he ordered. "Wanderford, let her go and put up your hands!"

A gun exploded behind a curtained doorway and a slug whacked the frame of the door beside Dunstan's head. Another gun coughed from behind a big davenport and a streak of agony seared Dunstan's ribs.

Dunstan's fist was like a swift-beating heart, squeezing steel-jacketed lead out of the automatic—two slugs for the davenport, one for the doorway. Behind the curtain Big Ben swore and tumbled out, clutching his belly with one red-dripping hand, down on his knees but still shooting.

In the big chair, Wanderford held Carol before him, a living shield of tossing blond curls and struggling

white limbs. Wanderford aimed an automatic, and as the gun flamed, Dunstan was spun and thrown to the floor by a smashing, ripping blow high in his left chest.

On his hands and knees, fighting the black fog that was trying to swallow him, Dunstan saw Wanderford slap the girl with the flat of his pistol, saw Brian leap to her defense and then roll on the floor, hit by somebody's bullet.

THE black fog rolled back, and a red haze of awful fury came in its place. Without knowing how he managed it, Dunstan was on his feet, moving toward Wanderford. The young fellow's pistol spat again and again, and the scorching breath of bullets fanned Dunstan's cheeks.

Then he was standing over the unconscious Carol and the terrified youth, and Wanderford was screaming, and Dunstan's bullet sped across her ivory shoulder and drove downward into the cringing body of the man.

He started for the davenport next, unmindful of the shots erupting before him. This time a bullet whipped through the fleshy part of his left arm and half turned him, but did not stop him.

Andy Ahern screamed an instant later, finally and briefly. The slug that caught him above the ear put an end to that.

One more, Dunstan thought. He started to turn toward Big Ben, but tripped over one of Carol's outstretched legs and fell. The pistol slipped from his hand, and when he tried to get up again he discovered that he could not.

Big Ben was dying probably, with

that lead in his belly—but he was holding up splendidly for the time being. He kept his revolver steady and his fleshy face was horrible to see.

"Now it's your turn, you damned snooping private dick!" he gloated. "Whatever happens to me, I'm sendin' you to hell, just like I planned. I only wish I could take you slow, with hot knives in your belly and blow-torches on your feet. . . ."

He went on like that, madly and profanely, for quite a few seconds—and meanwhile, behind him, Brian McGraw inched painfully and silently across the carpet. Brian McGraw's red coat was redder at one shoulder, where a bullet had dug deep, but the golden canine eyes were flaming with a fighting spirit that only a death-wound could dim.

". . . and so, you stinking louse, here's where you get what I should of gave you a long time ago!" Big Ben finished. His trigger-finger grew white—and at that instant Brian reached him.

There was a shot, but where it went Dunstan neither knew nor cared. He heard Ben's yells of anguish for a minute or two, mingled with animal snarls, and after that silence. Then Brian McGraw was beside him, licking his face, and Dunstan went to sleep knowing everything had been taken care of.

CAROL awoke him this time, with twining arms and clinging lips. He looked into her face and smiled, then saw the darkening bruise where Wanderford had hit her.

"I should have killed him for that," he said. "I didn't, because

we'll need him—but I should have."

She shook her head. "Darling, don't be so bloodthirsty. We're alive, aren't we—and in love?"

He looked at Wanderford, and slumped drunkenly in the chair.

"Where are the pictures and letters?" he demanded.

"In my dresser," Wanderford husked. "Top drawer."

"No one else has any?"

"No."

"Get them," Dunstan told Carol. "Burn them, then call the cops. We won't need documentary evidence—not with Wanderford's confession, and the police records of the dead ones."

When she had left the room Dunstan, propped on the sofa, said to Wanderford:

"You had social standing, but not much money. What you had, you must have spent gambling and raising hell. Ahern knew you were going broke, and suggested extorting money from some of your former girl friends, didn't he?"

"Yes," the other admitted dully.

"You picked on Carol first, because she was making big money in radio, and you thought she'd be terrified at the idea of a scandal. You furnished the material, and Ahern and his boys handled the dirty work. Then, when Carol refused to pay, and Ahern was going to kill her rather than risk getting caught, you got cold feet. You came to me with that fake burglary story, thinking it would put you in the clear if there was any trouble. Right?"

"Right."

"Tonight, after I'd mentioned that I knew it was Ahern and was going after him, you phoned and

tipped him off. It had to be you, because I hadn't told anyone else. You thereby enabled Ahern to set a trap for me."

He thought of the redhead, and wondered if he ought to send her to prison; then decided he might as well let her go. She was only a tool, after all—a woman in love with a heel—and he could afford to be magnanimous.

"And Ahern told you to kidnap Carol from my place, so they could take care of her if necessary. You went upstairs and killed Tommy Kilgore—"

"He had a gun. I had to shoot him. I put his body on the fire escape."

"You'll burn for that, I hope," Dunstan muttered. He looked up as Carol entered the room. "Find them?"

I FOUND them. I burned them in the kitchen oven. I'd never have believed Howard would have anything to do with such nasty business, till he shot Tommy and made me come down here at the point of a gun.

"Those other men came later. They were going to wait here and kill you when you came back, if they hadn't killed you already." But I

talked them out of that, darling. I said I'd pay a hundred thousand dollars if they'd let you go. I said I'd pretend I was in love with Howard, and get you to drop the case altogether.

"All the time he was holding me on his lap they had guns pointing at you and me, and all the time I was hoping you'd understand and do something, and praying you wouldn't be hurt.

"I tried hard to fool you, sweetheart, and yet I think I'd have died if you had been fooled."

"I wasn't, Carol—and *he* wasn't." Dunstan pointed at Brian McGraw, stretched out at their feet, watching them. "When he snarled, there in the doorway, he was telling me he smelled a murderer in this room—the same murderer whose scent he had caught in my apartment."

Down the corridor the elevator door clanged and heavy footsteps and voices echoed.

She whispered, "Before the police take you away from me to a hospital, I want you to know that my contracts don't matter any more. From now on my career is with you."

"It's been a good night's hunting," he said, and his wounds didn't bother him any more.



KILLER BEWARE

By RALPH CARLE

Suddenly she darted into his arms, lifted her head and looked up at him.



TECTIVE BILL GILMAN liked pretty women, but he liked his job even more, and when the girl who gave her name as Beth Dean, began to talk, he abruptly elevated his eyes from the expanse of silken-clad legs she displayed so effectively before him.

"Okay," Bill grunted. "You're here about Lerou. Go ahead and talk, but nothing you or anybody else

can say will worm that rat out of the death house."

Her face was alternately white and crimson. She had to moisten her lips before she could continue and Bill noticed her sharply manicured nails biting into the palms of her hands as she clenched her fingers.

"I—I that is—" she hesitated, then suddenly raised her head to stare Bill Gilman straight in the eye. "Lerou never murdered Clifford Chapel. You've made a mistake, officer, and I'm here to remedy it."

"Is that so?" Bill raised his eyebrows. "Listen, lady, Lerou is sewed up. He hasn't got a chance. He's tied up with the Chapel kill, and I've got him for it. He had the motive and the time and he can't prove an alibi. We got him just a little too fast for that."

"It's—it's about that alibi that I'm here," the girl broke in. "You see Lerou couldn't have killed Chapel that night because—he was with me. That's why he wouldn't give an alibi. But I won't see him die. I won't, I tell you!" *

Bill Gilman was on his feet towering above her. He reached down and lifted her up. She was a foot shorter than he, and she had to tilt her head back to look into his face. She had azure blue eyes, he noticed, and lips that seemed to demand a kiss. There was a trim loveliness about her too, a sort of refinement that wouldn't go with a woman who would spend her time alone with a man like Lerou.

"You're going to tell that story to a jury?" Bill demanded. "You're going to perjure yourself for a rat like him?"

"I'm going to tell my story," she

said quietly. Then suddenly her voice raised to a high pitch that Gilman knew could be heard outside his office. "Lerou didn't kill him. I'll prove he couldn't have been there, and nothing you can do will prevent me. Nothing—do you understand? Nothing—short of kidnaping me!"

She turned quickly, walked to the door and threw it open. Half a dozen reporters were listening avidly. They tried to stop her, but she pressed through them and vanished out the main door of police headquarters.

BILL GILMAN sank back into his chair and frowned. That girl, if she had no record, could establish an alibi for Lerou. But what the hell—Lerou almost admitted killing Chapel. If that girl's story were true, Lerou would have spilled it days before. The honor of a woman didn't mean much to Lerou. There was something else, some other reason why this girl should so suddenly appear with that story.

Bill Gilman leaped to his feet. He slid a gun into his shoulder holster, jammed a hat on his head, and raced out of the office.

"Gonna snatch her, Bill?" one of the reporters queried with a laugh. "Her yarn will certainly queer your case."

"You're crazy," Gilman grated and went on. He reached the curb in time to see the girl climbing into a taxi. Her slit skirt revealed a tempting length of flashing silk and leg.

"Damn it," Bill thought, "she can't be mixed up with that louse because she wants to be. Whatever this is, it's a frame."

He jumped into another cab and used his badge. "Follow that hack with the dame in it," he ordered. "Lose it and you'll lose your license."

The cab jolted forward. Bill kept his eyes glued on the cab ahead. He could see the blue and yellow hat set jauntily on the side of her head. He hadn't even asked her what her name was, he reflected. What a sap he was when pretty eyes looked into his own.

The two cabs rolled steadily on. She showed no signs of knowing she was trailed. It was the easiest job of shadowing Bill Gilman had ever done.

a dollar-eighty. I'll leave five bucks on the seat."

"Okay, copper," the driver answered with a relieved note in his voice. "You're carryin' your own insurance. But if those birds in back start shootin', I'm gonna stop damn' quick."

THEY were in the swirling downtown traffic. A red light held up the reporters' cab. Bill's taxi pulled alongside the one in which the girl rode. He yanked open the door of her cab and slid in. She raised a hand to her throat and paled until she saw his face.

The girl was willing to sacrifice her reputation, her honor, to provide an alibi for the most vicious killer in the city! It didn't make sense to Bill. Maybe he was following a red herring—but he must find the reason behind it all

"Say, copper," the driver broke in on his reverie. "I know you got your lamps on that hack ahead, but I just looked in the mirror. There's a couple guys trailing you. Are they gonna shoot, copper?"

"Damn!" Bill cursed and whirled in his seat. Half a block behind he saw the cab following and he had a bare glimpse of the occupants. Reporters! They were out to discover where this girl of mystery lived.

"When the traffic gets thicker," Bill ordered his driver, "pull alongside that cab we're following. I'll climb in. You keep on going like I was still in back. Draw those damned leeches off my trail. The meter says

"Oh, oh. I—I what does this mean? Why are you following me?"

"To find out why you came all the way to headquarters and told me that lie. Wait—" he pushed her gently back in the seat as she leaned forward to give the driver instructions. "You've told him where to go already. He's going there and so am I."

"Then you *are* going to kidnap me! You *are* crooked just as they said you were!"

"Who said I was crooked?" Bill demanded. He tried to put the fire of anger in his voice, but somehow it just wouldn't come. He was very close to her in the jolting cab and the

warmth of her body stilled whatever anger that arose. He was tempted to lean over and hold her closer. She was deathly afraid of something.

The cab had left the mid-section and was heading for the outskirts. Traffic had thinned to only an occasional car. It was still early evening, but the highway was almost deserted.

"Why don't you tell me what this is all about?" Bill asked after a moment of strained silence. "You know a mug like Lerou wouldn't keep his trap closed for the reputation of any woman—not if the rap against him was only parking his car near a hydrant. He ain't that kind, sister, and if you know him, you know that's the truth."

"He was with me," she said in a low, uncertain voice. "And I'll tell it to the jury too. I've got to—I—"

Suddenly the cab swerved off the road. Bill was aware of a heavy car forcing them off the highway. He lifted a hand to draw his gun, but hesitated. If there was any shooting, this girl might be hit. His fist froze on the butt of his gun.

The door of the cab opened and a man, whose face was masked, peered in. "Okay, you lousy dick," he snarled. "Come outa there. We didn't figure on you comin' but it's okay. You're just making it easier."

Bill saw two other figures behind the masked man. If he could draw and shoot fast . . . His gun started to slip out of its holster. He heard the girl scream. There was a swish. A padded object crashed down on the top of his skull. Bill Gilman sagged and crumpled to the floor of the cab. Engrossed in the three men before him, he had failed to see the

other door of the cab open and a fourth masked man use his bludgeon to strike him down.

Dimly he heard the girl's renewed scream and a curse from one of the men.

"Don't sock him again, you sap," this man warned the wielder of the blackjack. "There can't be no marks."

That was all. Oblivion of darkness and silence engulfed Bill Gilman.

HE AWOKE to stare at gleaming stars. For a moment he felt he was sinking again into unconsciousness for the stars were spinning in a galaxy of light. But he lifted his head and saw that he was lying flat on his back, his face directly toward the sky.

Those were real stars he gazed at.

Bill struggled to his feet and shook an aching head. The highway ran a dozen yards to his left and cars streaked by. He remembered suddenly. The cab and the girl he had followed. The sudden attack by masked men. What did it all mean? What had happened to the girl and the taxi?

He had to get back to town. He had told no one of his destination. They would wonder where he was and what he had been doing. A thought hit Bill Gilman like a thunderbolt. He stopped dead as full realization came to his brain.

The girl had spoken of being kidnaped so she couldn't testify in Lerou's behalf. Reporters had overheard that. He had followed her, outwitted the reporters who trailed him in turn, and vanished. A cab driver somewhere in New York

could tell how he climbed into the cab beside the girl. It looked like a perfect snatch with the kidnaper being Bill Gilman.

He thumbed a ride back to town, taxied to Headquarters, and met an irate chief of detectives and an equally raging district attorney.

Dimly he heard the girl's scream—then all went black.



"Well, Gilman," Brady of the detective bureau began the moment Bill entered the office. "You've got some explaining to do. You went out of headquarters after a girl. Six hours

later, you show up. Your story had better be good."

"It's rotten," Bill retorted glumly. "I was trailing a girl who came here with some phoney yarn to help Le-

rou. She was lying and I knew it. I got into her cab, but it was stopped. Four masked men grabbed her and slammed me on the head. I woke up an hour ago, a hell of a long way from here."

"It's bad, Gilman," the district attorney frowned. "Personally I believe your story, but those newspaper boys are going to wrap you up for delivery to the board. They heard the girl talk about a snatch. They followed you and they cornered the taxi driver you paid to lead them from your trail. Everybody knows you hate Lerou. You had him, too, until this mess turned up. We can't delay the trial and our evidence is purely circumstantial."

"Nevertheless," Bill broke in stubbornly, "that's my story. I got slammed on the head and the girl was gone."

"How about the taxi she was in?" Brady queried.

Bill shrugged. "That was missing too. The driver must have been one of the gang."

"Got your gun and badge?" Brady went on. "Did they take your money?"

BILL hadn't thought of that. He knew he had his wallet for he had paid the taxi driver who took him to headquarters from it. His gun was intact and his badge and cuffs too.

"Let's see your head," Brady said grimly. "If that rap you got put you out of commission for four or five hours, it must have been a sweet sock."

Brady quickly looked at Gilman's head. There was no sign of a blow, not even a bump.

"My hat was on," Bill told him. "They could have used some kind of padded slugger. I heard one of those guys say there were to be no marks on me."

"Gilman," Brady clasped his hands behind him. "I've known you for years and I believe you, but—nobody else will. If this is a frame-up against you, it's a good one and it may stick. I'd produce that girl if I were you and I'd see to it she corroborated your story. The trial starts at ten o'clock in the morning. You'll be one of the first witnesses. Better get busy, son. If you need any help, ask for it."

Bill dropped into the chair behind his desk. He was swearing softly. Brady was right. It was a perfect set-up. Lerou's lawyers would bring up the point. On cross-examination he'd have to admit the girl had come to him with that story and that he had followed her only to be knocked unconscious. His hate for Lerou was no secret.

He dropped a hand into his side coat pocket for his package of cigarettes. So busy had his mind been since he woke up that he hadn't thought of smoking. His exploring fingers didn't find the cigarettes. Instead they closed on a velvet purse.

Gingerly he drew it into the light. A faint whiff of perfume reached his nostrils. He recognized it. The girl of mystery had used the same scent. This was her bag, jammed into his pocket as she was taken from that cab. Quickly, he opened it. There were the usual feminine articles of make-up. A purse held ten dollars and some change. There was a letter folded twice and tucked away in a side compartment. It was addressed

to Beth Dean and it gave her street address.

He removed the single sheet of paper. There were three lines of scrawled writing on it.

"If you want to see a certain guy again, come to 1167 Lakeview Boulevard and ask for Taylor. Be there by ten tonight—or else—"

Like a shot Bill Gilman was out of his chair. He dashed out of headquarters, hailed the first cab, and gave the address he had found on the letter.

FORTY minutes later he walked into a low type beer tavern. A frowzy bartender looked up, but there was no sign of recognition in his eyes.

"Ale," Bill ordered roughly. He looked the place over.

A glass of dripping brew was put on the bar before him. He drank slowly, and made no attempt to talk.

Behind the bar he saw a curtained recess. Probably a hall or stairway, he decided. If Beth Dean were a prisoner, the chances of her being held in this joint were good. Bill shuddered,

Under the suspicious stare of the bartender, Bill turned and walked out. He went on down the street, pausing to gaze into a store window and at the same time to glance back at the tavern. An evil face was peering from the doorway watching him. He sauntered on, walked a half a dozen blocks before he turned a corner and began to run.

He reached the next block, then doubled back, and, when he figured he was opposite the rear of the tav-

ern, he cut through alleys and over fences.

As he neared the back of the place, he heard footsteps in a steady pad-pad. Someone was guarding the rear.

He crept over the fence, making no more noise than a shadow. A squat man was walking slowly back and forth before rear entrance.

Bill waited until the guard strolled to within a dozen feet of him before he leaped. His right hand clamped hard over the guard's mouth while his left shot a hard punch to the chin. He felt his man go limp. Bill jabbed home another short punch. The unconscious man dropped to the ground. Bill searched him and moved his .38 automatic, transferring it to his own pocket.

For a moment he studied the back of the building. It was two stories high. Light gleamed in only one of the second story windows. There was a high rubbish box against the wall of the house. Bill clambered up on this. By raising himself slightly he could peer into the room. The curtain was drawn, but an inch of space gave him an ample view.

Beth Dean was in there. Two men stood close to her. One gripped her wrists tightly. Bill could see the pallor of her face.

HE DREW his gun, snapped off the safety, and pressed the muzzle against the window. If a knife flashed or a gun gleamed, he'd shoot. But nothing happened.

He could hear the voices of the men dimly. One of them had the build of the masked leader of the band who had kidnaped the girl and knocked Bill cold. He was talking and grimacing in delight.

"You're not so bad," he gloated. "Maybe I'll be back later when I got more time. The boys won't bother us. You might as well learn to like me a little. You're gonna be here for a long time and I can make things easy for you."

"Get away from me," she retorted tensely. "Get away, you rat!"

The crook laughed again. He squeezed her shoulder and ran his fingers over her white throat; then he turned to his companion.

"Let her go. She'll be safe in here. Even if she gets nerve enough to beat it, Conly will nab her outside." He grimaced at the girl. "Remember, beautiful, I'll be back. Think it over. I can do lots for you."

Her hands freed, Beth slapped the crook smartly across the face. He turned crimson and his hands came up, clawlike, to hover about her throat. Bill's finger tensed on the trigger. But the crook regained control of his fury.

He sneered at the girl, motioned the other man to the door, and followed him out.

Bill tapped very lightly on the glass. He saw her whirl in new alarm. Again he tapped. This time she came slowly toward the window. She lifted the shade without raising it entirely.

WHEN she saw Bill's face, she quickly pulled back the latch and slid the window up. He climbed in, closed the window again, and made sure the curtain was down.

"You!" she gasped. "I—"

"I'm here to find out why you spilled that lie about staying with Lerou. They'll never let you testify. This is all a plant to queer me and

get Lerou loose again. I'm accused of snatching you because of that yarn you told me—and half a dozen reporters. They think I don't want you to testify because I hate Lerou. Well—I do. He was responsible for the murder of a buddy of mine. Nothing we could ever pin on that rat, mind you. That's the way he works. He killed Chapel and you know it as well as I do.

"If you spilled that phoney alibi, he'd be free again, but if you testify that I didn't snatch you, that Lerou's own men did it, you'll start warming the chair for him. How about it?"

She was standing close to him. Suddenly she darted into the safety of his arms. The warmth of her felt good, made Bill almost forget the spot he was in. She lifted her head and looked up at him.

"I—I can't," she said softly. "Please believe me. There's more than just me to consider. It's—it's Ronnie—my brother. He used to do small jobs for them. They wouldn't let him quit even when he wanted to. Now they have him hidden somewhere and, unless I do as they tell me, they'll kill him. Don't you see now that I can't do as you ask. I should never have slipped my purse in your pocket and dragged you into this."

"The rotten bunch of lice," Bill swore softly. "Listen, if I get your brother to a safe spot, will you tell the truth?"

She nodded eagerly. "Of course I will and—and I'm so glad you came. That—that other man is coming back—for me. Can't we get away? I'll go as I am. I don't care—so long as you are with me. I—I hated to lie to you."

Bill held her closer. He tilted her pretty head back and kissed her full on the lips.

SUDDENLY a shout from below the window reached them. Bill let her go, hurried to the window, and drew back the curtain an inch. The unconscious guard had been discovered.

"There's going to be hell to pay," he told Beth. "I'll help you out of the window. Once you get on the ground, run like hell for the nearest cop. And be careful! If those birds think you're getting away, they'll plug you so you won't talk."

"But Ronnie—my brother," she gasped. "They'll kill him."

"Not for awhile they won't," Bill promised her. "I'll keep 'em too damned busy trying to save their own skins to think about him. He's somewhere in this building too. Lerou's gang hasn't more than one hideout. Listen—they're on the way. Get behind that door. I don't think they'll use a tommy-gun because the racket would be heard for half a mile."

Bill threw up the curtain. A gun cracked and a slug shattered the window, sending a cascade of splintered glass over his shoulders. Bill fired two hasty shots into the night and saw three lurking figures speed for cover. Three! Too many! Beth wouldn't have a chance. Bill pulled out the automatic he had taken from the guard. He handed it to Beth.

"Use it," he snapped. "We've got to hold 'em off. If only this wasn't so far out! Damn it—there's sure to be only one cop on this beat and he may be a mile away. Here they come."

He saw her jam the gun into the

side pocket of the coat she wore. There was a battering at the door. Bill raised his voice.

"The next time anybody tries to smash that door in, I'm starting to shoot," he warned.

"It's Gilman, the dick," Bill heard the leader's voice rasp. "We gotta get him now. Hey, Louis, wrap that silencer around your gat and blow the lock to hell. We'll get that louse and get him."

There was the soft pop of the silenced gun and the clash of metal against metal as the bullet ripped the lock to bits. The door suddenly flew open. Bill dropped to one knee, his gun steady.

"The first guy who comes through, gets it," he warned. "If you've got the nerve, come on. I'll save the state dough by sending you to hell right now."

"Bill," Beth whispered. "You can't do it. You haven't a chance. I'll be all right. Go through the window before they come in. Please—"

"The hell I will," Bill retorted savagely. "I'm fighting it out."

SUDDENLY a man lunged through the door. Bill's gun spat and the crook went down to lie very still. Just outside the door was an overhead light. The silenced gun plopped and the light winked out. Eerie darkness shrouded the killers.

They would be difficult targets now while Bill would be in plain sight.

He felt soft arms go about his neck and warm lips kiss him. Involuntarily he responded to the kiss. The arms became rigid. A slippered foot came up and kicked the gun out

of his hand. Like a flash the girl threw herself on him.

"I've got him," she yelled. "Come on in! Hurry!"

Bill's world toppled. He had placed faith in this girl, had been certain of her. Now she had turned on him. The room was filled with the crooks. The girl was roughly pulled up and a gun shoved hard in Bill's side. The taller of the crooks laughed.

...
"So it's Gilman himself," he taunted the detective. "The cop who is gonna be busted in the morning. We're gonna bump you, copper, and then we'll be sure nobody will testify against Lerou. They'll think you scrammed. It's a sweet set-up. Better than Lerou could think up. Don't move, copper, or I'll plug you where it hurts."

Bill lifted his head and glared at the girl. "So you're one of them," he raged. "You let me think you were different. You low—"

Beth stepped close to him. Her hand smacked him across the mouth. She turned toward the leader of the gang.

"I'd rather have you," she said in a voice heavy with meaning. "I don't like cops."

"Swell," the crook folded her close to him and leered at Bill.

"It was all a bluff," Bill raged. "Your brother a prisoner—hell. I should have known better than to fall for something like that."

"Yeah?" the crook laughed at Bill. "We did have her brother but by this time he's on his way to South America and he won't come back until after Lerou walks outa jail free. I'm gonna bump you, and this dame is gonna be mine until Lerou gets out

of jail. Okay, boys. Where will you take it, copper, in the belly or the back?"

Beth had one arm about the crook's neck. The other was plunged deep in the pocket of her coat. The detective saw the pocket raise slightly. There was a crash and the single overhead light blinked out.

"Run!" he heard Beth yell. "Hurry, Bill."

The intense darkness made shooting impossible for the crooks. Bill knew it. He sped to where Beth was now tightly gripped by the enraged gangster. Bill slammed home a savage blow and sent the crook reeling. He wrenched Beth free, grabbed her arm and pulled her in the direction of the doorway. A shot blasted a path of light and lead whistled close to Bill's ear, but the crooks dared shoot no more for fear of hitting one another.

"The stairs are to the left," Bill heard her say. "Never mind me. Run, Bill!"

"And I thought you were double-crossing me!" Bill told her.

AS THEY started down the darkened steps, Bill heard a shout. Beth stopped dead. "It's Ronnie," she cried. "He's here!"

"Give me that gun," Bill said, and took the weapon from her. "You beat it down the steps and wait. I'll get your brother."

The crooks were coming into the hall now, but warily. Bill fired a shot toward the door and heard one scream in pain. He reached a closed and locked door. A single shot broke the lock.

Inside Bill found a young man with his hands and feet tied tightly.

Bill lifted him, draped him across his shoulders, and sped out into the hallway again. From outside he heard the shrill of a police whistle.

Bullets began to fly. One seared into his arm, but he scarcely felt it. He leveled the automatic and emptied it. He paused long enough to hurl the useless weapon toward the crooks who were crouched in the darkness. Then he sped down the steps. Beth was at the door. Heavy feet were running through the deserted barroom of the tavern. Beth opened the door. Two radio patrolmen were on the way.

One of them recognized Bill. "What the hell's goin' on?"

"Plenty," Bill said grimly. "Hold

those guys off. They're part of Lerou's tribe and they're ready to shoot it out."

"We'll hold 'em. Two other men are going around to the back."

"Take this guy to the hospital." Bill set down his half-conscious burden. And put a guard over him. Important witness in the Lerou trial!"

Outside he found other radio cars and patrolmen streaking toward the building. Beth climbed into one of the radio cars. Bill slid in beside her. He paused long enough to kiss her on the mouth. "For a minute," he said, "you made me think you were a lovely traitress. Now I just think you're lovely...."

CORPSE CROSS

(Continued from page 81)

overhead lights and Hornigle glared up at me with eyes that looked glassy through the thick lenses. "You . . . asked me to help you . . . escape . . . you were . . . baiting a trap . . . for me. . . ."

"That's right, Charlie. Even though you'd given Brewster a blood transfusion I knew you were the logical suspect, the one who must have shot him. You covered your tracks pretty well, but not well enough.

You were anxious to have me run away, for that would have made me seem all the more guilty. You double-crossed yourself—or rather, Brewster's corpse double-crossed you."

Hornigle cursed me through the froth of blood that filled his mouth.

He died with the oaths still choking him.

Then I saw Laurine running toward me. "Rex, thank God you're innocent! I knew it all the time, but . . . oh-h-h, Rex, will you forgive me for everything? Can't we start all over again?"

I wanted to double my fist and hit her in the face. But there was a deeper sort of blow I had in my power to strike. I laughed and turned and put my arm around Jane Benton.

Jane cuddled to me, her ash-gold hair faintly fragrant. Then and there, before everybody, I asked her to marry me as soon as my divorce should become final.

She said: "Yes, Rex." And she kissed me.

Wedding Bells



PRIVATE DETECTIVE HUBERT BATES was at peace with the world. He'd just collected six hundred dollars cash from a satisfied client in Aiken, South Carolina, and was rolling home to Atlanta, Georgia. The Bates Private Investigation Agency was bringing home the bacon from its first big case. That case would bring other big cases. The agency was out of the red for the first time. From now on, things would be different, better.

He hunched his husky, wide-shouldered frame lower beneath the wheel of his light sedan, and his gay whistle filled the car, spilled through the open windows into the velvety Carolina night. Lips puckered, Bates' broad, clear-skinned face had a pleasing look of mild good-humor.

That look had fooled more than one Atlanta crook before he'd left the force six months ago to start the agency; but under the right conditions, with his fist wrapped about the forty-five automatic that snuggled under his left arm, Bates was as hard-boiled and destructive as the Vikings whose rich blood flowed in his veins.

Abruptly, he stopped whistling, gripped the wheel with muscular

fists and pulled his husky body erect, stared through the windshield. A short distance ahead a car was parked on the left side of the highway, facing him. Its headlights were on, and, picked out brilliantly in the white beam, was a woman.

Standing between him and the headlights, her body showed as a dark cameo against the light-pierced haze of her clothing, and Bates gulped as his appreciative blue eyes followed every curve of her figure.

Rolling closer, he saw she was standing with her face toward him, and the light behind her made clean-cut, tapering lines of her legs from ankle to hip, made plain the interesting swell of her torso.

Bates' husky body warmed with sympathy, among other things. Innocent, defenseless girl standing beside a stalled car on a dark highway. She must be half frightened to death. He'd stop, help her, get acquainted, and maybe—

HE COASTED along, stopped, then saw the girl wasn't alone. There were two other women with her. One a blonde, tall, big-bodied and robust. Not his type, at all. The other was a slim redhead, sitting behind the wheel of the stalled car. The

Blonde, brunette, and red-head! They had everything that a man could look for in women! Detective Bates' hopes rose to the skies—but that was before he had learned the whole truth about his lovely companions

By JOHN WAYNE



"Listen, big boy!" she said, "Bessie'll—" "Forget Bessie!" he told her.

one who'd been standing in front of the headlights was a brunette, oval of face, plump of figure.

"May I assist you, ladies?" Bates gripped the wheel with sweaty fists. The little brunette was his type.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" Her voice was husky; her eyes large and dark beneath long lashes. She moved toward the car, and Bates wet dry lips as her sheer silk dress molded her plump figure. She pressed dimpled fingers to her breast. "It—it stopped," she husked, "and I—we—" The tall blonde was oddly aloof, cautious. The redhead just sat in the stalled car, and, through the open door, Bates could see the white flash of her bare legs.

He unglued his fists from the steering wheel, slid across the front seat of his sedan and stepped to the road, his hat gripped in sweaty fingers—five feet nine inches of hard-muscled, tow-headed man eager to help womanhood in distress.

"I'll be glad to!" He started.

"Hoist 'em, lug!"

Bates froze, paralyzed. His hat slipped from his fingers and dropped to the road. His flesh quivered as if he'd been doused with iced water. A dull ache in his mouth made him realize he'd bitten his tongue. Dazedly, he pushed his fists shoulder-high, and muffled, choking sounds pushed from his throat. Six hundred bucks! Taken in by a dame!

THE tall blonde had an automatic gripped in white fingers, and its yawning muzzle centered upon the third button of his vest. A business-like scowl twisted her broad, over-painted face, and her eyes, fringed with heavily mascaraed lashes, were twin bits of chill blue ice.

"Say!" Bates' stiff lips formed words. "You can't get away—"

"Skip it!" rasped the blonde, her too-red lips barely parting. "Fan the louse, Irene." Then over her

shoulder to the redhead in the stalled car. "Mabel, wipe our prints off that hot can. We're ditching it."

Bates gulped, and felt the clammy mist of sweat on his forehead.

Irene, the plump brunette who'd showed him things in the car's headlights, glided to him, and her dimpled fingers rippled over his body, patting his pockets, exploring his clothing with a professional dexterity. She found the forty-five under his arm, took it; found the six hundred bucks, took that.

Bates thought of socking her on the jaw, but she kept out of range of the blonde's gun, and the blonde kept watching him with cold blue eyes.

After burrowing warm hands into every pocket, feeling every possible place where he could have concealed another weapon, Irene stepped back. Bates was breathing heavily. Her rippling fingers had made him jumpy.

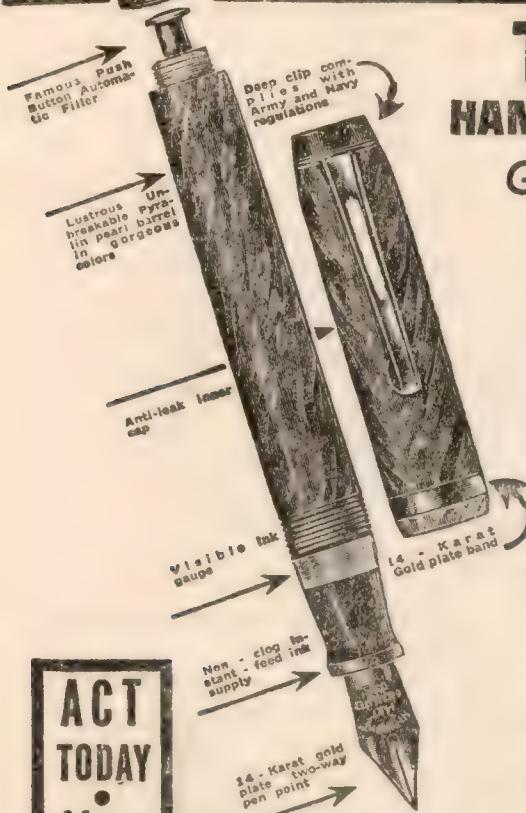
"Forty-five rod in a shoulder holster, Bessie," husked Irene. "He's a private dick, I make it. He's lousy with jack." She passed the money to the blonde, kept the forty-five, and trained its yawning muzzle on Bates' middle. The detective held his breath. The gun was a hair-trigger weapon.

"Now, wait a minute. Can't we—" Bates lowered his arm a trifle. Bessie and Irene swung the two guns suggestively, and his arms pushed higher. He broke out into a cold sweat and shivered.

"Keep your lip buttoned, Oswald," ordered the blonde. She twirled her automatic about a white finger with an easy familiarity that chilled Bates' blood, made his scalp tingle. "You're



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married now. Just like that." She laughed harshly.

"From now on you're my husband. These two roscoes prove it." She stepped forward, jammed the gun in Bates' ribs, and he winced as the hard metal bit into his flesh. "You're my husband, see?" She flung harsh words over her shoulder, without taking her chill eyes off Bates. "Mabel, you and Irene change our stuff to this lug's bus. He's taking the three of us west and—"

"Say! What — what—" Bates swung dazed eyes from the blonde to the brunette. The blonde's husband—take the three of them west—it sounded goofy, like a crazy joke, but the blonde didn't act like she was joking. "If it's a stick-up, take the money and beat it. If—" Once free of them, he could plug the road with motor-cops and pick them up in a few hours.

"It's a stick-up and a snatch, hand-home," the blonde harshly informed him. "You're it on both counts. You're playing husband to me and playing like I tell you until I tell you to lay off, or I'm leaving you here in the road, a stiff!" Her blue eyes glittered in the headlights and her red lips drew into a thin line across her hard face. "I got reasons. Do you play ball, or—" She dug the automatic deeper into his side.

"But—but—" Bates' voice stuck in his throat. He shut his eyes, half hoping to wake up and find it was a nightmare. He opened his eyes.

THE blonde Bessie was still there, her automatic still dug into his side, the heady perfume of her buxom body filling his nostrils. Mabel and Irene were transferring new-looking luggage from the stalled car to his sedan. The soft Carolina

night, hovering closely about the headlights, cloaked the scene with a strange mantle of unreality; yet the whole mad thing was real, deadly so.

Robbed, kidnaped, and forced to pose as the husband of a strange woman on a trip to Lord only knew where. Golly! If the newspapers ever got the story—! He'd have to leave Atlanta, laughed out of town. The Bates Agency would blow up. A detective, advertising guaranteed results, then three wise women taking him for a buggy-ride—Golly!

Frantically, he whipped his gaze up and down the highway, hoping to spot the lights of an approaching car. The road trailed off into darkness both directions, a darkness that seemed to chuckle mockingly. He measured the distance to the ditch beside the road. It was deep, screened by thick bushes, but—it was over fifteen feet away. Too far.

He wouldn't have a chance of making it before Bessie blasted. She handled a gun like she knew what it was all about, and her harsh voice was vibrant with desperation. All three of them were probably wanted for—

"What's eating on you, lug?" Bessie ground the automatic into his ribs. "You bashful around women? If you are, it's just too bad, because you've got three on your hands now. Three wise dames, brother!"

"Listen," Bates' voice choked in his throat, "why can't you—ladies just take the car and the money and beat it. I—" Desperately, he thought of making a grab for the gun. No go. Bessie had the weapon buried in his side, and she'd squeeze the trigger at the first break. Irene would cut loose with the forty-five.

"Listen, sap," Bessie said, "we need a guy like you, see? You're

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doing like we say, or else . . . I got the chair coming anyway, so—" She shrugged broad shoulders. "I know guys who'd jump at the chance to run around with three dames—three dames who've been cooped up in—Mabel," she whipped over her shoulder, "fan the car. I want this lug's driver's license. We'll play this thing like the real Mac. Bessie Dorgan works things right. This guy'll do like we say."

BATES' mind whirled. Five minutes ago he'd been a well-satisfied private dick with six hundred bucks in his jeans. Now— The blonde leaned closer, pressed against him, and he shuddered. Three of them! Three cooped up for— Then the truth exploded like a blaze of fire in his mind. These three women were—

"Here's the card, Bessie." Mabel stepped out of the sedan, her dress whipping up to reveal white legs bare from ankle to milky thigh, and her green eyes burned with a disturbing flame as she looked at Bates. He closed his eyes, swallowed painfully, wild thoughts churning in his head.

"Hubert Bates. Twenty-five. Blonde, and weighs one sixty-five. Five feet nine." The blonde read the card, laughed shortly, harshly. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Carries six hundred bucks in his pants pockets. I have run around with worse guys. Girls, I'm now Mrs. Hubert Bates. You two are my sisters. The lug's little Hubie, and he's taking the family on a western tour. You girls won't find me jealous about my husband!" and Bessie giggled—a queer sound, coming from her hard lips.

Bates shuddered. "Hubie dear, get in the back seat of our car. Sister Mabel will drive. Sister Irene

will sit on the front seat and keep a gun on you, so—”

“How about me sitting with Hubie?” Mabel pouted moist lips, and her green eyes shone like a cat’s. “I could get along with—”

“Don’t forget, Sister Mabel, he’s my husband!” Bessie giggled again, and Bates’ teeth clicked together. He looked longingly at the ditch.

Irene was sitting in the back of his sedan, her plump face looking strained, eager. She had his forty-five automatic in her dimpled fingers. Mabel was standing on the pavement beside the open front door of the car. Bessie was behind him, her automatic jammed against his spine, and he could hear her rapid breathing, feel her hot breath on his neck.

He gulped, sucked air through set teeth, and felt a cold, sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He’d have to play their game for a while and watch for a break.

Bessie pushed him toward the car.

“Let’s go,” she ordered. “Get in the car, Hubie darling. Jump! Move when Mamma Bessie speaks!”

She slid into the car beside him, on his right. Irene was in the back to his left, his forty-five gripped in her fingers. She got out, slid into the front seat with Mabel at Bessie’s order. Mabel swung the car about and headed it back toward Aiken.

Bessie kept her automatic jammed in Bates’ side. Unconsciously, his fists clenched until the nails bit into the palms. He was well-known in the Carolina town. Someone would see the car with the three women in it. Perhaps he could signal and—

“Take it about forty-five per, the limit, Mabel,” ordered the blonde. “We don’t want any Law after us. Turn left at Warnerville, cut over

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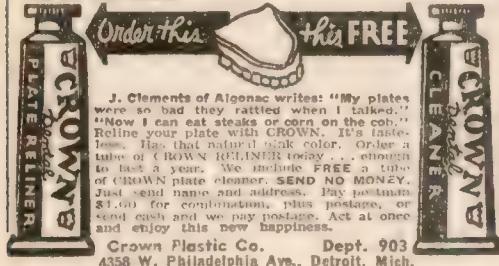
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to the Greenville road at Trenton. We'll skip Aiken and go on through to Asheville, North Carolina, tonight. In the morning—"

A lurch of the car swung her warm, buxom body against Bates, and she eased up the pressure on the automatic.

Bates grinned tightly as an idea formed in his mind. If he could get her to move the gun, move it where he could make a grab at it—He brushed her plump arm with hard fingers, and Bessie gasped.

"So that's it, eh, Hubie darling!" She leaned forward swiftly, dropped the gun into the front seat, leaned back, and her too-red lips curled in a slow smile. "Irene, you watch Hubie. If he tries to jump out of the car, plug him. Now, with your mind off that gun, you dope, you can make love to your Bessie."

"I—I" Then Bates pushed a hard arm about her shoulders, lips tight as he felt her hot, pulsing breath. He drew her close, and eagerly, her moist lips sought his mouth.

Warm, crushing, her plump arms slid about his neck, drew him to her. Her hot, panting breath scorched his cheek, and he felt as if he were being smothered by Bessie's greedy caresses.



"IRL, I picked a *man* this time." Bessie Doran leaned against the rear cushion and her blue eyes fairly glowed in the semi-darkness of the sedan. "Hubie'll do. I always figure things right. I got you kids out of the Big House, out of the job we pulled, and I'll get you to the—"

"You three are—" Bates kept his voice casual. His idea, he knew, was right.

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"Pen-lamsters." The blonde's red lips drew into a thin line. "Mabel, Irene, and I scammed from the pen in Atlanta this morning. I planned the break so slick we made a clean getaway. We stuck up a joint for new duds and luggage, but had to burn a guy when we got the car. We ran out of gas where you found us. Now—"

Bates' husky body was rigid. Robbed and kidnaped by three women crooks, all of them wanted for murder! If he were caught posing as the husband of the blonde, he'd have one sweet time explaining. The newspapers— His lips tightened grimly. If he could gather the three of them in and return them, he'd get the credit for planning the whole thing. They—

"I was stuck a bookful for burning my last old man," went on Bes sie. "I can't get any worse than the chair, but I'm blasting my way out of anything before I go back to go bugs waiting for the hot squat. You're playing hubby until we get clear. After that—" She shrugged and her eyes went cold. "You're buying some more duds, then we're dolling up either Irene or Mabel like a man. Mabel'd be best because of her red hair. Then the four of us, two guys with their wives, are heading on west. The cops would never stop two couples in a car when they're looking for three dames, see?"

"Clever." Bates touched dry lips with his tongue.

"I'll say. I'm a two-time killer, Hubie. Just remember that if you get to thinking of a break. Irene popped a guy fanning a joint, but they couldn't make the rub-out rap stick. Mabel burned a half-wit on a job and dragged down manslaugh-

ter. We're out now, and we're staying out. In Asheville—"

"Let's stop at the Asheville-Biltmore Hotel, Bessie." Irene, facing them from the front seat, had Bates' forty-five resting on the seat-back, its muzzle centered on his chest.

"Yes, and run right into a house dick," sniffed Bessie. "I'm the brains of this mob, sister. We're passing up the Battery Park, the Charmil, and the others, too. We're grabbing off a nice, quiet tourist room and we're laying off the whoopee until we're safe. All four of us are rooming together, double room. Hubie, you see, has to be watched, or he might take notions. We'll take turns catching sleep."

QUIETNESS settled down in the sedan. They neared Greenwood, and Bessie retrieved her automatic, warned Bates to keep both hands in sight. Nearing Greenville, both Bessie and Irene wrapped their guns in clothing taken from the new luggage.

"This, lug," raspingly explained Bessie, pushing her bundled weapon into Bates' side, "is as good as a silenced gat. The cloth damps the blast until it's not so bad. Mabel, you drive carefully. Be ready to turn and run when I say. Hubie, if you try to pull anything I'm blasting; though I'd like to have you along until I catch up on my love-life." She giggled harshly. "The girls'll take good care of you, but they'll blast if they have to. The cops might scrag us if we have to shoot you, but that won't do you any good after you're cold meat, see?"

Bates saw, and kept his hands well in sight.

As they hit the highway on the other side of Greenville, it was near-

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ing midnight, and there was still over sixty miles to go before reaching Asheville. Mabel drove a little faster.

They picked up gas in Hendersonville, but Bessie watched Bates too closely for a break. At a quarter to one they were rolling along the Hendersonville Road into Asheville.

At one they stopped at the curb in front of a three-storied house which boasted a lighted tourist sign.

"I've a beautiful room on the third floor," chattered the bright-eyed woman who popped up like a waiting spider to their ring. "Private bath. It'll be a dollar apiece for the night. A gentleman from Florida always asks for this room when he comes through. Breakfast will be fifty cents a head if—"

"We'll take the room." Bessie held her cloth-wrapped automatic against Bates' spine. "See you later about breakfast. Hubie dear, Sister Mabel and Irene will bring in what we'll need. I know you're tired, dear." A sharp jab drove Bates into the musty hall. "My husband and two sisters," Bessie explained sweetly to the bright-eyed woman, "are with me. We're driving back to New York after a short vacation trip. Come, sisters."

The prodding gun forced Bates up three flights of uncarpeted stairs and into a small room on the third floor.

Clutching four one-dollar bills, taken from Bates' six hundred, the bright-eyed woman disappeared.

"Well, that's that." Bessie pushed Bates to the center of the room and scowled at the two lumpy beds. "Mabel, you and Irene catch some shut-eye. I'll watch this louse for

a while, then wake one of you. Hubie, you'd better take the other bed and cork off. You'll be driving the car tomorrow."

Bates, fully clothed, dropped down upon one of the beds and planned. Scheme after scheme flashed through his mind, only to be discarded as he detected flaws.

Bessie sat in a chair, her hand gripping the automatic which was now wrapped in a towel. She watched Bates with cold blue eyes.

"No playing tonight, sisters," Bessie said. "We're still too hot for monkey-shines. Any whoopee and the old dame might get suspicious and call the cops. Grab some shut-eye."

Irene joined Mabel, who was sitting on the edge of her bed.

BATES watched the two girls for a moment, and his lips tightened into a thin smile. He had an idea.

Minutes dragged past. Irene rolled over on her back. Mabel squirmed, muttered in her sleep.

Furtively, Bates stole a glance at the blonde Bessie sitting in a chair near his bed. She raised the towel-wrapped automatic as he moved, her blue eyes cold. Bates relaxed, simulated sleep, yet watched her through slitted eyes.

Shortly, Bessie got up, went to the other bed and shook the blonde Irene awake.

"Irene," she ordered, "you're watching Hubie for a while. Pop the louse if he makes a break, and watch out that he don't try to grab the gun. I'm catching a little sleep. It's two A. M. Take his gun. It's there beside Mabel. Call her at three."

Bessie stretched plump legs on the



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bed, laid her towel-wrapped automatic on the pillow beside her head.

Irene got up, blinking sleep out of dark, babyish eyes. Sleep-tousled, and with Bates' towel-wrapped automatic in her dimpled hand, she dropped into the chair near Bates' bed and stared at him sullenly.

Minutes dragged past. The blonde Bessie started breathing heavily. The heavy breathing changed into an unladylike snore. Mabel rolled over on her back, one hand resting on her breast. Irene's dark head dropped an inch, eyelids drooping. Bates slid one foot to the floor. The bed squeaked, and Irene came awake with a start, lifted the wrapped gun to cover him.

"If it wasn't for the getaway, mug," she gritted, "I'd burn you down and get some sleep!"

"Mind if I sit up and talk?" Bates eased to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. If he could get close enough to Irene. . . .

"Okay, but if you think you're going to—" "

"Not a chance. I know when I'm in a spot." He noted his package of cigarettes on the bureau, saw that his key folder and money-crammed pocketbook were beside the smokes. "Mind if I get a cigarette?"

"I'll get them." Irene backed to the bureau, took a cigarette for herself, then tossed the pack to Bates, returned cautiously to her chair.

Bates lighted his fag, eyes bitter with disappointment. He'd wanted to go after the smokes himself, pass close to Irene. His eyes swept the room.

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room, the noise would wake Mabel and Bessie. If he could get Irene in the bathroom. . . . He cut his eyes toward Mabel and Bessie. The blonde was sleeping with her automatic lying on the pillow beside her head. Mabel was now lying on her stomach. Bates' eyes swung back to Irene. Then abruptly, his pulse quickened.

Irene had his forty-five automatic, a towel wrapped about the muzzle, in her right hand. The cigarette was in her left. He tried to drag his eyes away before she noted the hope in them. The hammer of the heavy automatic was down! She would have to pull the hammer back to cock the weapon before she could possibly shoot. If he could get the gun before—

"Thought you wanted to talk." Irene swung one beige knee over the other, and Bates gulped.

"Talk?" He pulled his mind back to the business in hand, dragged deeply on his cigarette, and trickled smoke through his nostrils. "Oh, yeah. They treat you—girls all right in the pen?"

"Fair. No parties." Irene sucked avidly on her cigarette, wiggled stocking toes. "But I'm going to make up for lost time. I'm going to—" "

"How about just you and me?" He flicked a glance toward Bessie and Mabel. The redhead and the blonde were sleeping, out.

Irene stiffened, raised the forty-five, and her thumb touched the hammer. Bates' hopes took a nose dive, yet he pushed slowly to his feet.

"Where do you think you're going?" Irene's dark eyes narrowed. Her moist lips went tight.

"In there." Bates jerked his head toward the bathroom, almost

holding his breath as he waited to see what she would do.

"I'm going with you."

"Well—" He walked slowly toward the bathroom. Irene got up, and he felt the muzzle of his forty-five against his back.



BATES walked across to the lavatory. Irene stood just inside the door, six feet from him. Her thumb was still on the automatic hammer, but the hammer was down.

Turning water into the lavatory bowl, Bates wetted his face and hands, reached for the towel hanging beside the lavatory.

"A good-looking girl like you," he said, voice muffled by the towel over his face, "always makes me have ideas."

"Yeah?" Irene's dark eyes widened a trifle, and she wetted her lips.

"Yeah." Bates dropped the towel on the edge of the bathtub, eased toward the plump brunette. She didn't move, yet the gun in her hand remained steady, hammer still down.

Slowly moving closer, Bates reached out, touched her, and Irene shoved the gun into his middle.

"Listen, big boy," she gasped, "I—" Bates squeezed gently. Irene's red lips parted slightly, baring white teeth. "Bessie—"

"Forget Bessie," whispered the detective, sliding gentle fingers across her back. Irene stiffened, then seemed to melt under his touch. She moved closer, yet kept the gun jammed into his stomach. Bates leaned over, his lips seeking her mouth.

"Stop. I—" His lips touched hers, and the panting brunette's red mouth quivered.

Bates pulled her to his taut body, reached out and gently closed the bathroom door behind her. His plan called for no noise, but—

Irene was panting, moaning, the dimpled fingers of her left hand pressing the back of his head. He felt the towel-wrapped gun slide along his stomach, touch his side.

Bates acted instantly.

Swinging his right hand down in a flashing arc, his muscular fingers wrapped about the forty-five automatic, tore it from the panting brunette's fingers. At the same moment, his right shoe came down hard, grindingly upon her stocking-covered left foot. His left hand darted to the towel he'd dropped on the bathtub, whipped it up and shot the wadded fabric to her face, muffling the scream of pain before it left her lips.

Half fainting with the shock of sudden transition from passion to numbing pain, she sagged. Bates eased her to the floor, crammed a

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(Continued on page 127)

corner of the towel into her mouth and secured it by tying two corners about her head. Another towel from the rack secured her hands behind her back. She was still half unconscious as he tied her ankles.

BATES pushed to his feet, a tight smile on his lips. Breaking his and the blonde's tete-a-tete was a crime, but— He shrugged, eased into the bedroom. Moving swiftly, silently, Bates shut the bathroom door, locked it. Irene would be out of the picture for a few minutes.

Bessie and Mabel were still sleeping. The blonde was on her back, mouth open, snoring. The redhead was on her side.

Bates shook his head slowly and sighed. Jerking his mind back to business, he darted to the bureau, slipped the car key, the license folder and the money-crammed pocketbook into his pockets.

At any moment Mabel or Bessie might wake up., Irene might recover her senses and pound on the bathroom floor.

Moving swiftly, silently, the detective eased to the side of the bed and slipped the automatic from Bessie's pillow. His own forty-five automatic was jammed into his coat pocket. He left the bed, started across the floor, and Irene came to life in the bathroom, banged on the floor.

Bessie and Mabel shot erect in the bed, Mabel staring at him with green, sleep-dulled eyes. The big blonde took one look at the gun in his hand, then clawed frantically through the bed covers, hunting her automatic.

"I've got it, Bessie, darling," Bates said grimly. "Irene's locked in the bathroom and her banging

will bring the landlady on the run.
I—

"You—you—" The big blonde's face twisted with fury. She started to scramble from the bed.

"Hold it!" Bates lifted the automatic. "I won't shoot either one of you to kill, but I'll put a slug where it'll hurt like hell!" Irene had gotten the gag from her mouth and her shrill scream made Bates grin. He heard running feet pound on the stairs outside. Someone was coming to investigate. Bessie and Mabel sat up in the bed and stared at him with wide, scared eyes. Someone pounded on the bedroom door, and the landlady's shrill questions pierced the panels.

"Well, everything's over but the shouting, girls." Bates pushed to his feet, backed toward the door. "Nailing three escaped prisoners from the Atlanta pen will give the Bates Agency some nifty publicity. I hate to turn you in, but business is business and pleasure is—" He grinned. "Well, the three of you would have killed me eventually, guns or no guns, so—" Private Detective Hubert Bates grasped the doorknob behind him.

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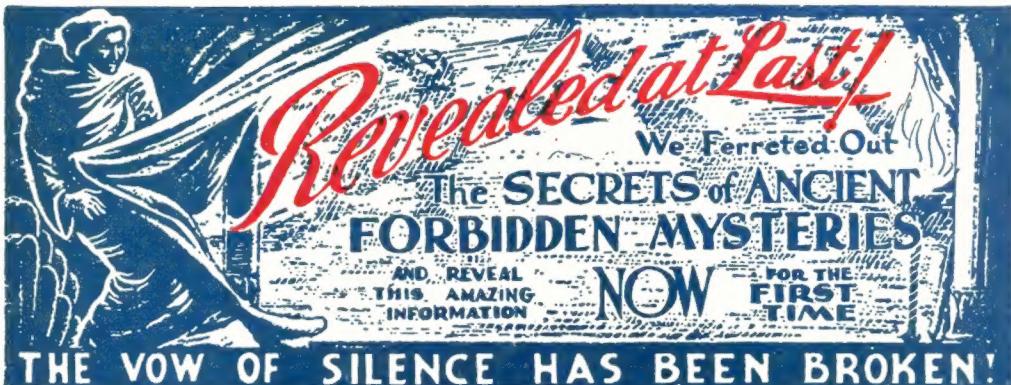
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